

## *Original Paper*

# “Beauty in Meaning” in English Translation of Zhuang Love Songs from Variation Theory of Comparative Literature

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### ***Abstract***

*In the process of English translation of Zhuang love songs, it is impossible to fully convey the “beauty in sound”, “beauty in form” and “beauty in meaning” of the original text. Among them, “beauty in meaning” is the most important, so we must not lose “beauty in meaning” in pursuit of “beauty in form” or “beauty in sound”. This paper will focus on the existing English versions of Zhuang love songs with love as the theme, such as Liu Sanjie’s ballads, Poya Love Songs, Liao Songs of Pingguo Zhuang etc., from the perspective of variation theory of comparative literature, to explore the “beauty in meaning” in English translation of Zhuang love songs and the translation strategies to achieve “beauty in meaning”.*

### ***Keywords***

*Beauty in meaning, Zhuang love songs, variation theory, English translation*

## **1. Introduction**

Xu Yuanchong (2006) believes that the translation of poetry should convey the “beauty in sound”, “beauty in form” and “beauty in meaning” of the original text as much as possible. However, the status of “three beauties” is not equal, and there are degrees of importance. It is impossible for the translation of poetry to fully convey the “beauty in sound”, “beauty in form” and “beauty in meaning” of the original text, so more attention should be paid to the “beauty in meaning”. Among them, “beauty in

meaning” is the most important, so we must not lose “beauty in meaning” in the pursuit of “beauty in form” or “beauty in sound”. The second important is the “beauty in sound” which is related to rhyme, and the last is the “beauty in form”.

In the process of English translation of Zhuang love songs, “beauty in sound” and “beauty in form” can be achieved through rhyme, alignment, control of syllable number and line number (Fu, 2023), but “beauty in sound” and “beauty in form” should not be pursued unwisely, and also rhythm and the representation of forms should not be overemphasized, lest it affect the artistic conception of the original text and can not reproduce the “beauty in meaning” of the original text. Therefore, “beauty in sound” and “beauty in form” should be realized under the premise of “beauty in meaning”. Based on this, this paper will focus on the existing English versions of Zhuang love songs with love as the theme, such as Liu Sanjie’s ballad, *Poya Love Songs*, *Liao Songs of Pingguo Zhuang* etc., from the perspective of variation theory of comparative literature, to explore the “beauty in meaning” in English translation of Zhuang love songs and the translation strategies to achieve “beauty in meaning”.

In the love songs of Zhuang nationality, the singers always use metaphors, hints, innuendo, foils and puns to express their thoughts implicitly, and express their feelings through the scenes they write and the things they chant. So what we call “beauty in meaning” can be reflected through artistic conception. It can be said that artistic conception is the soul of Zhuang love songs and poetry. For example, *Liao Songs of Pingguo Zhuang* is a folk literature work that occupies an important position in the literary history of the Zhuang nationality and even in the history of Chinese literature. It is a long poem that combines narrative and lyric expression. It uses a large number of simile, metaphor and other rhetorical devices as well as a large number of images to enrich its expression, to depict the unique life style of Zhuang people, and to reflect the beauty of artistic conception in poetry. *Liao Songs of Pingguo Zhuang* has rich and colorful content and profound cultural connotation, which can well reflect the local customs and folk customs of Zhuang people at that time. Due to the unique history, national psychology and aesthetic habits of Zhuang people, many images in *Liao Songs of Pingguo Zhuang* have special significance, carrying the connotation of Zhuang ethnic culture (Li & Wang, 2019), and also showing the unique beauty of artistic conception of Zhuang love songs. When translating Zhuang love songs into English, attention should be paid to reproducing the beauty of the original artistic conception, such as symbolic meaning, the meaning of puns and the implication.

## 2. Introduction to Variation Theory

According to the theory of variation, dialogues between different cultures should follow two basic principles. The first is “the principle of discourse”, that is, the basic categories and rules of thinking and speech of a certain culture. The second is the “principle of equality”, that is, the heterogeneous discourse of the East and the West should achieve true equal dialogue (Cao, 2018). Cao Shunqing (2018, pp. 313-314) believes that translation is not just a purely linguistic issue, and behind two texts or

two languages are two very different and heterogeneous cultures and discourse systems. Every culture and discourse system has its own unique conceptual categories and rules of speech. There may be some overlap, cross and correspondence between them, but they can never be completely equivalent. Translation itself is a potential dialogue between different cultures and discourses. In literary communication in the context of heterogeneous civilization, the recipient's different cultural backgrounds and cultural traditions have the role of selection, transformation, transplantation and penetration of the communication information, which is cultural filtering, and it is the key to promote the variation of literary texts (Cao, 2010, p. 98). To this end, he cited the "Milky Way" as an example. Most translators translate "Milky Way" into "银河(literally means 'silky river')", but Zhao Jingshen translated "Milky Way" in Chekov's novel into "牛奶路 (literally means the Milk Road)". He was therefore ridiculed by other translators. But Zhao Jingshen's translation is not completely wrong, because the Chinese translation of this expression is essentially a deep dialogue between Chinese and Western cultures. In a rational sense, the "Milky Way" is indeed the "银河", but it ignores the Western culture it contains. In the West, the ancient Greeks believed that Milky Way was the Milky Way that led from Mount Olympus, where the gods lived, to the earth, and that its brightness was related to the milk of the queen Herarillo. In China, the "银河" is not a "way", but "river", which is related to the folk fairy tale of "the Cowherd and the Weaver girl". If we translate "Milky Way" into "银河", it means we are replacing Western culture with Chinese culture. The associated meaning of the expression with ancient Greek mythology disappeared. But if we can keep the meaning of "way" in "Milky Way" (such as Lu Xun's version "神奶路 (literally means the 'Divine Milk Road')"), then the discourse systems of Western and Chinese myths can exist equally in the same language. This is the "equal dialogue in the mutual translation of heterogeneous discourses" emphasized by the study of comparative literature variation.

### **3. Strategies of Reproducing the "Beauty in Meaning" in the English Translation of Zhuang Love Songs from the Perspective of Variation Theory**

What is "beauty in meaning" in the poetry? Xu Yuanchong believes that poetry should be a "combination of poem and painting". Image is a kind of artistic aesthetic form which organically combines subjective interest and objective object image (Wang, 2010). Poetry is about artistic conception. For example, the three English translation versions of "彩云 (literally means 'colorful clouds')" in the first sentence of "A Farewell to Baidi City" are: "colored cloud", "rainbow cloud" and "crowned with cloud". Among them, the most recognized translation is "crowned with cloud", since it uses a colorful crown to show the brilliance of the cloud, and is not talking about color but the color can show itself. In this way, the effect of "1+1=3" was achieved (Li, 2004, p. 83).

The so-called "beauty in meaning" means that the translation should convey the artistic conception or the beauty of association generated by the original content. However, since "beauty in meaning" needs

to be generated by association under a specific background, it is difficult for the readers to generate the same association when translated into another language without the same background (Xu, 2006). Due to the differences in the cognitive domains of the source language culture and the target language culture, there will be differences in the cognition of the original and target readers to the same thing. Therefore, the image in the original text may not be able to find its equivalent or its corresponding expression can be found in the target language culture, but the expression can only partially convey the connotation of the image in the original text. That is to say, the reproduction of the image will be more or less different in the translation. Under the guidance of the theory of variation in comparative literature, the English translation of Zhuang love songs should not seek for the absolute “equivalence” between the original text and the target text, but explore the “differences” between the original text and the target text.

Next, we will choose some typical examples to illustrate the point. First of all, take the following song as an example: “Attaching” in *Liao Songs of Pingguo Zhuang: Songs of the Daytime*.

Source text:

Youx noih naeuz dou lumz

妹说我忘你

Hwnj mbwn bae cam byaj

上天问雷公

Rongz laj bae cam vuengz

下海问龙王

Yiuq fueng lawz lumz hoiq

看哪个忘我

Target text (Zhou & Lu, 2011, p. 88):

Don't you say I forget you;

The Thunder<sup>①</sup> can be witness;

The dragon can also testify;

That I'd never forget you.

<sup>①</sup>Thunder: Here “Thunder” is in capitalization because it refers to the god of Thunder in Chinese myth. The “byaj (God of Thunder)” in Zhuang nationality has typical personification characteristics. In folk tales, Thunder is a towering god who holds the fate of life and death in his hands. In the Zhuang area, the custom of “Thunder of God forbidding marriage” has been spreading, and The “byaj (God of Thunder)” can influence the reproduction of human by dominating human marriage and love (Xiao, 2009). The “byaj (God of Thunder)” in Zhuang culture, whether it is compared with Zeus in Greek mythology or Thor in mythology of west Europe, has a different cultural connotation. Therefore, the translation of “byaj” “Thunder” with the first capitalized letter with a note here has special reference and specifically points out that it refers to “the god of Thunder”, but it should be noted that the content

“in Chinese myth” at the end of the note is misleading. The “byaj (god of Thunder)” here belongs to the Zhuang culture accurately, so it would be more appropriate to change it into “in Zhuang myth”. In addition, more information should be added to explain the cultural connotation represented by “byaj” in Zhuang nationality, so that the information in the original text can be fully conveyed to the target language audience. In order to reduce variation to a greater extent, lest the target readers mistakenly think that the god of thunder here is the thunder in their culture. Therefore, annotating translation is an effective way to reproduce “beauty in meaning”, but attention should be paid to the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the annotation.

Take another example.

Source text:

Boux dawz rap dwg rengz

挑担的费力

Gvaq cib geng gouj lueg

翻十岭九谷

Gvaq cib lueg gouj geng

过十谷九岭

Coj aeu cienz dwk rap

定要压担钱

Target text:

The dowry bearers have worked hard,

As they crossed mountains and valleys.

Ten mountains and nine valleys they've crossed;

They deserve the yadanqian<sup>①</sup>.

<sup>①</sup>Yadanqian: It's a kind of payment or red packet used as rewards put in the empty dowry containers, such as baskets or boxes, in order to show gratitude. It is given by the bridegroom to the gift carriers after the dowry is delivered.

In Zhuang culture, after the dowry is sent to the groom's home, the groom will put a red envelope into the empty box, or basket, to the people who carry the dowry, in order to show his gratitude, and such red envelope is called “cienz dwk rap (literally means ‘money for carrying the shoulder pole’)”. This money is a unique custom of Zhuang people, and there is no equivalent in English culture. If only transliteration is used in English translation, readers will lack the ability to understand the meaning of the original text when they read the translation for the first time, and they will need to read the annotated content before they can summarize the meaning of the word. If the meaning of “cienz (money)” can be added to the target text “yadanqian”, readers of the target text can better understand the gratitude of the original text and show that the singer cherishes the beautiful love. In addition, it should be noted that, since the original text is Zhuang, it cannot be transliterated into Chinese pinyin

“yadanqian”, and the expression of Zhuang “cienz dwk rap” should be retained, but the expression of Zhuang is very difficult to pronounce, especially for people without any knowledge about Zhuang language. Therefore, it is difficult to convey the “beauty in meaning” of the original text by transliteration, and the more effective method should be free translation and annotation. The free translation can reproduce the meaning of “cienz (money)” in the original text, so that the reader can understand it at once.

Another example:

Source text:

Naiq mbouj ndaej ru rwk  
累得不得了  
Rox youx dwk fouz ndiep  
知哥打爱符  
Dwk fouz ndiep couh vanz  
打爱符才甜  
Cingj hwnj banz mbouj naiq  
上山才不累

Target text:

Exceedingly I am tired,  
As you cast a love spell<sup>①</sup>.  
With so sweet love, untired  
I feel to go up the slope.

<sup>①</sup>A love spell: In Zhuang culture, after falling in love with each other, the female will poison the male with a legendary venomous insect named “Gu”, which can only be detoxed by her, because the girl or wife fears that her beloved may be unfaithful. The male will charm the spell of love for the same reason. By doing so, they feel certain that the other party will not change the mind.

The main idea of the source text is that, when people are in love, they become full of strength with the love spell cast by their sweetheart, and they are not afraid of feeling tired even when they climb the mountain. The love spell here refers to the fact that in Zhuang culture, a woman, after falling in love, poisons a man with a legendary poisonous insect called “Gu”, which only she can detoxify and the girl or wife fears her sweetheart may be unfaithful. For the same reason, men also fall under the spell of love. By doing so, they are assured that the other person will not change his or her mind. The “fouz (符) ndiep (爱)” in the source text is translated into “love spell”. Although the definition of “spell” in English is “words that are thought to have magic power or to make a piece of magic work; a piece of magic that happens when sb says these magic words”, it can be seen that “spell” is related to words. When a spell is applied, something needs to be said to make it effective, while the Zhuang expression “fouz (符) ndiep (爱)” is related to a mysterious insect. Although the objects involved are different,

both share many of the same characteristics, such as being mysterious and having magical power. In this way, “love spell” can be used to replace “fouz ndiep” in the source text, because it can reproduce the mysterious artistic conception in the source text and make readers feel that love gives people the power to go forward and face difficulties. After the replacement, the corresponding annotations can reproduce the connotation of the original text to the greatest extent. In short, when dealing with the keywords closely related to the artistic conception of the original text, it is often impossible to find the exact equivalent expression in the target language. In this case, we can use the method of literal translation and annotation to reproduce the original text and strive to reproduce the artistic conception of the original text to the greatest extent.

To sum up, in the English translation of Zhuang love songs, the most commonly used methods to reproduce the artistic conception of the original are free translation plus annotation and literal translation plus annotation, so as to convey the profound Zhuang spiritual culture contained in the love songs. When it comes to the reproduction of the cultural factors of the source language, we should compensate for the loss of the cultural information of the source language in the process of English translation and reduces the variation in the target text to a greater extent.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the process of the spreading of Chinese heterogeneous cultures, aesthetic and ideological factors should be taken into account in order to achieve the “beauty in meaning”. Variation is inevitable in the translation of heterogeneous cultures. Zhuang love songs, as a part of minority culture, are the same. Only by accepting a certain degree of variation, can the Zhuang love songs walk out of the scope of local literature, and truly enter the world literature and be recognized by the world literature.

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