

Original Paper

An Appreciation of Zhang Peiji's English Translation of *Autumn in Peiping* from the Perspective of Translation Aesthetics

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Abstract

*As a major form of writing, prose is both literary and ideological. The translation of prose is not only the conversion of language, but also the transmission of aesthetic value. Zhang Peiji's English translations of Chinese prose, characterized by precise linguistic ability and ingeniously aesthetic craft, serve as a crucial bridge for introducing Chinese prose to the world. This paper, adopting translation aesthetics as theoretical framework, selects Yu Dafu's *Autumn in Peiping* and Zhang Peiji's English translation as research objects. It analyzes the beauty of artistic conception, language, and culture in the source text, and further explores Zhang Peiji's strategies for reproducing the original aesthetic qualities, aiming to provide a useful reference for the aesthetic practice in prose translation.*

Keywords

Translation Aesthetics, Zhang Peiji, Prose Translation, Autumn in Peiping

1. Introduction

Modern Chinese prose occupies an important position in the history of literature. As Lu Xun (2005) stated, "The development and success of prose after the May Fourth Movement has even surpassed that of fiction, drama, and poetry." As a classic of modern prose, Yu Dafu's *Autumn in Peiping* still has a unique artistic charm with its unique artistic conception, simple language style and deep patriotism. With the increasing frequency of cross-cultural exchanges, prose translation has become an important way to spread Chinese culture and show the spirit of Chinese aesthetics. In this context, the core challenge for translators is how to effectively convey the aesthetic characteristics of the original text.

Mr. Zhang Peiji is a famous translator in China. He has been committed to the English translation of Chinese prose all his life. His *Selected Modern Chinese Essays* collects a large number of works by famous writers, which is also regarded by many translators as a book with the significance and value of

a textbook although it is not a textbook (Liu, 2001). Zhang's translation not only adheres to the principle of faithfulness but also emphasizes unity of readability and aesthetics. As an interdisciplinary discipline integrating translation and aesthetics, translation aesthetics provides important theoretical support for prose translation research. Its core is to explore the aesthetic composition, aesthetic judgment and aesthetic reproduction strategy in the translation process.

2. Overview of Translation Aesthetics Theory

According to existing references, the earliest foreign work that clearly illustrates the concept of "translation aesthetics" and makes a systematic theoretical construction is *Translating Life: Studies in Translational Aesthetics* edited by Shirley Chew and Alistair Stead (Chew & Stead, 1999). In China, Fu Zhongxuan's *Practical Translation Aesthetics* established the basic framework of translation aesthetics (Fu, 1993). Later, Liu Miqing's *An Introduction to Translation Aesthetics* further deepened the theoretical research of translation aesthetics, believing that translation aesthetic activities involve three basic elements: aesthetic subject, aesthetic object and related aesthetic consciousness, criteria and reproduction methods (Liu, 2005). The composition of aesthetic object can be divided into two levels: formal system beauty and non-formal system beauty. Formal system beauty includes phonetic beauty, vocabulary beauty, syntactic beauty, etc.; non-formal system beauty includes artistic beauty, emotional beauty, style beauty and cultural beauty. The task of the aesthetic subject is to reproduce the aesthetic value of the original text through the target language on the basis of understanding.

As the core subject of translation activities, the translator's aesthetic literacy directly determines the aesthetic quality of the translation. Translators need to have keen aesthetic perception ability and be able to accurately capture the aesthetic information of the original text, including the artistic atmosphere, emotional tone and language style of the original text. At the same time, translators also need to have solid professional knowledge and certain cultural background accumulation, so as to skillfully use the language resources of the target language and the aesthetic letter of the original text. Translate original text into an expression that meets the aesthetic habits of the target language readers. In prose translation, the guiding significance of translation aesthetics is particularly prominent. The aesthetic value of prose has dual attributes of content and form. Its artistic mood creation, emotional expression, and language refining all have unique aesthetic characteristics. Therefore, translators need to take the guidance of translation aesthetics, deeply explore the aesthetic connotation of the original text, and use appropriate translation strategies to accurately reproduce the aesthetic value of the original text, so that the target language readers can be able to feel the unique artistic charm of Chinese prose.

3. Analysis of the Aesthetic Characteristics of the Source Text *Autumn in Peiping*

Written in 1934, Yu Dafu's *Autumn in Peiping* shows the author's deep love and emotional expression of the autumn in Peiping. (Beijing). The original text creates a unique artistic atmosphere with delicate brushstrokes and plain language, which contains profound emotional connotations and cultural heritage,

and has rich aesthetic characteristics. It mainly reflects three dimensions: the beauty of artistic conception, the beauty of language, and the beauty of culture.

3.1 Beauty of Artistic Conception

The artistic conception in literary works is an artistic realm formed on the basis of the blending of feeling and scene. It can show the infinite in the finite, reflecting the artistic beauty of literature (Liu, 2005). The original text creates an artistic conception of “limpid, serene and melancholy”.

“Limpid” is the clear state of mind brought by the high blue sky and the cool air.. The line “leisurely watch the high azure skies” depicts the unique vastness and clarity unique to the autumn sky of the northern country, which contrasts with the low and humid sky in the south. The description “closely observe streaks of sunlight filtering through their foliage” shows that the sunlight passes through the dense layers of branches and leaves of the locust tree and is filtered. There is no more scorching and fierceness in summer, only warm and clear.

“Serene” is not a silent and dead silence, but a keen capture of the slightest sound of nature and the peace of the inner world after the dust and noise are filtered out. The line “listen to pigeons circling overhead” uses sound to evoke stillness. The sentence “quiet and smell-less, they feel tiny and soft underfoot” conveys the tranquility of the environment with a subtle feeling..

“Melancholy” is a kind of compound emotion, intertwined with the sentimentality of the decline of life and the helplessness of the passage of time. The “sporadic feeble chirping of cicadas” shows the change of seasons, and also symbolizes the sense of time when prosperity is coming to an end and the feast is about to disperse. The description of “you will find the ground strewn all over with flower-like pistils fallen from locust trees” reflects a kind of silent and large-scale extinction. The withering of locust flowers reveals the emptiness and desertion after the end of prosperity. This is not a simple list of scenery characteristics, but the overall life mood born from the integration of the author’s heart and the autumn scenery of Peiping.

3.2 Beauty of Language

The original text builds an aesthetic system through concise vocabulary, flexible sentence patterns and appropriate rhetoric. In terms of vocabulary choice, it mainly adopts colloquial language and precise words for expressing emotions, avoiding ornate diction or gorgeous rhetoric. For example, colloquial expressions such as “strewn all over”, “cicadas are audible” are close to daily life, while words like “fine” “leisurely”, and “forlornness” accurately convey inner feelings, achieving a unity of accessibility and precision.

In terms of sentence structure, based on scattered sentences, it integrates whole sentence forms such as comparison and duality in a timely manner, forming a staggered rhythmic beauty. Take the opening line: “Autumn, wherever it is, always has something to recommend itself. In North China, however, it is particularly limpid, serene and melancholy”. The first half is a loose sentence, which is plain and natural; the second half of the sentence is a whole sentence. Through the juxtaposed structure of “particularly limpid, serene and melancholy”, it highlights the unique characteristics of autumn in

northern country. Furthermore, the original text employs rhetorical devices such as metaphor, personification, and quotation. For instance, comparing northern autumn to “yellow rice wine is to kaoliang wine, congee to steamed buns”, vividly illustrates the difference between autumn in the north and that in the south, making the language vivid, interesting, and infectious.

3.3 *Beauty of Culture*

Professor Liu Miqing points out that distinct cultural connotation is a major feature of language beauty. Be it artistic conception or language, there is a profound cultural blood flows through them. Through Yu Dafu’s description of autumn scenery and scenes of daily life in Peiping, the author reveals the regional cultural characteristics. For example: “Suppose you put up in a humble rented house inside the bustling imperial city, you can, on getting up at dawn, sit in your courtyard sipping a cup of strong tea, leisurely watch the high azure skies and listen to pigeons circling overhead”. Sipping strong tea, watching the sky, listening to the pigeons—these scenes are full of local flavor of Peiping, allowing readers to feel its lively street atmosphere and cultural charm.

At the same time, the original text also reflects the traditional Chinese national aesthetic state. In traditional Chinese culture, the aesthetics of autumn is often associated with sad and sentimental. Since ancient times, there have been poems such as “A thousand miles from home, I’m grieved at autumn’s plight; I’ll now and then for years, alone I’m on this height” “Since olden days we feel in autumn sad and drear” “Over old trees wreathed with rotten vines fly evening crows”. The author inherits such traditional aesthetic awareness, combining his portrayal of autumn with reflections on life and on the fate of his nation, thereby revealing a profound sense of national culture and sentiment.

4. Strategies for Aesthetic Reproduction in Zhang Peiji’s English Translation of *Autumn in Peiping*

The pursuit of prose translation is to reproduce the charm of the original text, so Mr. Zhang has always thoroughly understood the original text from the whole when translating, and added and deleted it appropriately, so that the superficial and latent meanings of the original text can be fully interpreted (Yang, 2007), thus achieving an accurate reproduction of its aesthetic value.

4.1 *Reproducing the Beauty of Artistic Conception*

Artistic conception is a very important and distinctive concept in traditional Chinese aesthetics. The analysis of prose and poetry is always inseparable from artistic conception. All beautiful prose has a beautiful artistic conception (Li, 2008).

Example 1:

Source Text: 可是啊，北国的秋，却特别地来得清，来得静，来得悲凉 (Zhang, 1999).

Target Text: In North China, however, it is particularly limpid, serene and melancholy (Yu, 2005).

Analysis: The translation selection is very ingenious. Limpid not only refers to the clarity of water, but also refers to the style of writing and clear thinking. Using it to translate “清” goes beyond the physical description of clear, reflects the clarity of the sky, and also reflects the clarity of the author’s state of

mind. “Serene” precisely captures the deep connotation of tranquility and peace. “Melancholy” is the classic literary equivalent of “悲凉”, which refers to a deep and poetic sadness. Juxtaposed as three adjectives, this structure sets an accurate tone for the emotion of the whole text and reproduces the artistic beauty of the original text.

Example 2:

Source Text: 脚踏上去, 声音也没有, 气味也没有, 只能感出一点点极微细极柔软的触觉(Zhang, 1999).

Target Text: Quiet and smell-less, they feel tiny and soft underfoot (Yu, 2005).

Analysis: The original text adopts the structure of double negative paving + affirmative emphasis, progressing step by step and finally focusing on the tactile sensation. Zhang Peiji’s translation completely this structure and takes the negation of “sound” and “smell” as the background state, making it more acceptable to English readers. “Tiny and soft” corresponds to “极微细极柔软”, which is in line with the characteristics of English using specific nouns and adjectives to convey attributes. He also adds the word “underfoot”, enhancing the concrete sense of “stepping on them”. However, the original phrase “感出” describes an active, slow process that requires deliberate attention and is a key action in generating the artistic conception. This transformation makes the literati’s interest in the original text, which deliberately pursues and cherishes extreme tranquility and subtle beauty in the modern hustle and bustle, to a certain extent, ordinary and routineized.

4.2 *Reproducing the Beauty of Language*

In traditional Chinese literary works, the use of words pays attention to scrutiny. The selected words should not only express the meaning, but also give the reader a sense of beauty. The same is true for the words in translation (Duan, 2022).

Example 3:

Source Text: 像花而又不是花的那一种落蕊, 早晨起来, 会铺得满地 (Zhang, 1999).

Target Text: On getting up early in the morning, you will find the ground strewn all over with flower-like pistils fallen from locust trees (Yu, 2005).

Analysis: In terms of sentence style, the translation does not directly translate the word order of the original sentence, but opens with an adverbial phrase, which is in line with the English expression habits. In terms of vocabulary, the Chinese term “落蕊” carries poetic nuance but is difficult to find the corresponding expression in English. Zhang Peiji translates it to “flower-like pistils”, adopting strategies of image concretization and compensation. The verb phrase “铺得满地” is rendered as “strewn all over”. Compared to words like covered, strewn is more dynamic and natural, which can better convey the quiet atmosphere of silent and natural falling in the original text.

Example 4:

Source Text: 在北平即使不出门去罢, 就是在皇城人海之中, 租人家一椽破屋来住着, 早晨起来, 泡一碗浓茶, 向院子一坐, 你也能看到很高很高的碧绿的天色, 听得到青天下驯鸽的飞声 (Zhang, 1999).

Target Text: Suppose you put up in a humble rented house inside the bustling imperial city, you can, on getting up at dawn, sit in your courtyard sipping a cup of strong tea, leisurely watch the high azure skies and listen to pigeons circling overhead (Yu, 2005).

Analysis: In terms of sentence structure, the original is a typical Chinese run-on sentence. The sentence style is loose but the rhythm is soothing, which is in line with the language style of prose. The translation does not stick to the word order of the original text, but integrates the preconditions into a subordinate clause. The main sentence uses a series of juxtaposition predicate structures to connect the core actions of the original text, taking into account the beauty of English logic and prose rhythm.

In terms of vocabulary, “皇城人海之中” is rendered as “inside the bustling imperial city”, which directly points out the identity of the ancient capital of Peiping. Bustling corresponds to the lively atmosphere of countless people, forming a sharp contrast with the later tranquility of sitting idly in a humble house. The word “破” is not directly translated as broken but as humble, which not only conforms to the simple characteristics of the original residence, but also avoids the sense of dilapidation brought by broken, and is more in line with the author’s aesthetic mood. “驯鸽的飞声” is rendered as “pigeons circling overhead”, adopting a strategy of depicting sound in shape: instead of directly translating flying sound, the dynamic description circling overhead allows English readers to associate the subtle sound of pigeon wings fluttering through the picture. “泡一碗浓茶” is rendered as “sipping a cup of strong tea”. Sipping can better reflect the author’s leisurely posture of sitting and tasting tea than drinking, echoing “leisurely watch”, accurately conveying the leisurely mood of the character.

4.3 Reproducing the Beauty of Culture

Language is the carrier of culture, and the beauty of language cannot be separated from specific cultural expression and emotional atmosphere (Hu, 2021).

Example 5:

Source Text: 比起北国的秋来，正像是黄酒之于白干，稀饭之于馍馍，鲈鱼之于大闸蟹，黄犬之于骆驼(Zhang, 1999).

Target Text: Southern autumn is to Northern autumn what yellow rice wine is to kaoliang wine, congee to steamed buns, perches to crabs, yellow dogs to camels (Yu, 2005).

Analysis: The four groups of metaphors in the original text are all unique Chinese food and animal images, carrying strong national cultural connotations: yellow rice wine is mild, while kaoliang wine is strong; congee is light, while steamed buns are thick; perches are tender and fresh, while crabs are rich and succulent; yellow dogs are small and nimble, while camels are massive and powerful. Zhang Peiji adopts a foreignizing translation strategy, rendering “黄酒” as “yellow rice wine” and “白干” as “kaoliang wine”, directly marking the categories and raw materials of wine, which not only avoids generalized translation, but also conveys the characteristics of Chinese wine culture. The translations of “稀饭” and “馍馍” accurately correspond to the form and taste of food; the translation also fully retains the classic analogy sentence of “A is to B what C is to D”, enabling English readers to grasp the core

idea that southern autumn and northern autumn are vastly different in character while successfully exporting the most representative symbols of Chinese wine culture, thus achieving the reproduction of cultural beauty.

Example 6:

Source Text: 第一是枣子树；屋角，墙头，茅房边上，灶房门口，它都会一株株地长大起来(Zhang, 1999).

Target Text: Take jujube tree for example. They grow everywhere—around the corner of a house, at the foot of a wall, by the side of a latrine or outside a kitchen door (Yu, 2005).

Analysis: Zhang Peiji's translation of the four locations is a detailed restoration of the spatial culture of residential space in northern China. “屋角” is rendered as “around the corner”, “墙头” as “at the foot of a wall”—these authentic spatial preposition phrases accurately depict the inconspicuous corner space in traditional architecture, implying the tenacity of jujube trees and the casualness of folk life. For “茅房”, he uses “latrine”, which conveys the rustic atmosphere of the original more precisely than toilet or restroom. The translation makes English readers seem to be immersive and see the vivid scene of jujube trees thriving in all corners of the courtyards in northern China, which is a model of cultural beauty.

5. Conclusion

Taking translation aesthetics as the theoretical perspective, this article analyzes the English translation of Zhang Peiji's *Autumn in Peiping* and explores his strategies and methods for reproducing the aesthetic qualities of the source text. Zhang Peiji's prose translation practice shows that prose translation is not only the conversion of language symbols, but also the transmission of aesthetic value. Translators need to have keen aesthetic perception ability, solid language skills and rich cultural knowledge, deeply explore the aesthetic connotation of the original text, and use appropriate translation strategies to realize the harmony and unity of the beauty of the original content and the beauty of form. In today's increasingly frequent cross-cultural exchanges, we need to take translation aesthetics as the guide, constantly improve the quality of prose translation, let more excellent Chinese prose go to the world, show the unique charm of Chinese culture, and promote the exchange and integration of Chinese and foreign cultures.

There are still certain limitations in the research of this article. If only a text of *Autumn in Peiping* is selected for analysis, the scope of research is relatively limited. Future research can expand the scope of texts, select more prose works translated by Zhang Peiji, conduct in-depth analysis in combination with translation aesthetic theory, summarize the aesthetic laws and general strategies of his prose translation, and provide richer support for the development of Chinese prose translation theory and practice.

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