On Two English Versions of the Poem "A Moonlit Night on the Spring River" from the Perspective of Functional Equivalent Theory

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Abstract. The poem “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River” written by Zhang Ruoxu is a brilliant pearl of Chinese culture, which is famous for its neat and balanced form, melodious and harmonious sound and profound meaning. Based on Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory, this paper intends to explore the English translation of “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River” by Xu Yuanchong and W. J. B. Fletcher from three aspects and tries to conclude which version is more acceptable through prudent comparison under the guidance of Functional Equivalence Theory.

1. Introduction

Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory is a major breakthrough in the field of translation and has been highly recognized by the field of translation since its birth, which has been the guiding ideology of translators’ translation practice since it was introduced into China in the 1980s. Functional Equivalence Theory emphasizes that the meaning of the original text should be paid attention to first and the limitation of the expression of the original text on translation practice should be reduced. This paper makes a comparison between the two English versions of the poem “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River” written by Zhang Ruoxu and analyzes which one is more acceptable in line with the principle of Functional Equivalence Theory.

2. Studies on English Versions of “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River”

Based on the theory of “Three Beauties”, Yang Mei (2009) analyzed Xu Yuanchong’s translation of “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River” and explored how to express the “Three Beauties” in the process of translation. Then Liu Zhen (2010) explored the English translation version of “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River” from the perspective of translation aesthetics. She strove to analyze the aesthetics temperaments, study and appreciate the beauty based on the case study of “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River”. What’s more, Liu Zhen aimed to display the beauty of the source text and target text and dug out how to represent the original beauty.

Wang Xiaoying (2010) thought that it is necessary to introduce the narrative study to the research of translation. Wang Xiaoying made efforts to discuss the loss of cultural meaning concerning theme, artistic mood and aesthetic appreciation caused by the definitive narrative perspective in English translation of Chinese classical poetry. Based on the theory of relevance translation put forward by Wilson and Sperber. Gao Yue (2010) explored how to find communicative clues in the
English translation of “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River” and how to restore the original context in order to achieve better translation effect.

Lv Zhaofang and Liu Junping (2015) took the English version of the poem “The Moonlit Night on the Spring River” by Zhang Ruoxu of Tang dynasty for example, trying to explore, in translating, the means and strategies that the translator employs to achieve the successful translation version from the original to the translation, as well as to express his personal experience and aesthetic enjoyment. From the perspective of translation characteristics, Ren Jing (2015) discussed and analyzed the differences between cultural words in the process of translation from the perspective of the five basic theoretical characteristics of translation, namely, the sociocultural symbol transformation, creativity and historicity. Cui Xuan (2015) had a research on cohesive devices of the English version of “The Moonlit Night on the Spring River” and found that cohesive devices can make the translation more smooth and graceful.

Paying attention to the external transmission of classical culture in the process of translating “The Moonlit Night on the Spring River”, Zhang Qing (2017) found the value of English translation of classical literature. In 2019, based on the theory of conceptual metaphor put forward by Lankoff and Johnson, Tang Jun and He Tingting (2019) compared the translating images between different English versions of “The Moonlit Night on the Spring River” from the perspective of entity metaphor, structural metaphor and orientational metaphor, making efforts to find the features of different versions.

3. A General Survey of Eugene A. Nida and Functional Equivalence Theory

3.1. Introduction to Eugene A. Nida

Eugene A. Nida (1914-2011), as a world-famous linguist and translation theorist, published more than 40 academic monographs, most of which were written by himself. Moreover, he delivered over 250 research papers. Among all his works, the most influential one was Toward a Science of Translating. Nida’s thought of translation were first introduced into China in 1980s. Based on profound theories and rich translating experiences, Nida’s new ideas about translation had a deep influence on Chinese translators and scholars. In the early 1980s, with the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, Nida’s translation theory was further introduced to China by a number of pioneer scholars. His thought had exerted a profound impact on the development of translation studies in China when Chinese translators came into contact with a systematic western translation theory for the first time. Nida’s theories aroused their great interests and enthusiasm in establishing their own theoretical system. Since then, translation studies in China began to bloom vigorously.

3.2. The Essence of Functional Equivalence Theory

According to Nida, the definition of translation is as follows: “Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalence of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style” (Nida, 1969: 12). As it indicates, Nida gives priority to “meaning” as it is the basic element in translation. However, the fact is that translators could hardly achieve equivalence from all aspects since the process of translation is often influenced by many factors such as the reliability of the text itself, the type of target readers and the purpose of translation. Therefore, the “equivalence” in Nida’s theory results from the comparison of
comprehension ability and responses between the original and target readers, which is just an appropriate degree of adequacy. According to Nida, the “equivalence” in the Functional Equivalence Theory includes four basic aspects: Lexical Equivalence, Syntactical equivalence, Discourse Equivalence and Style Equivalence. In the four aspects above, Nida suggests that meaning comes first, and then does the form.

In the book *Language, Culture and Translation*, Nida divides “functional equivalence” into minimal functional equivalence and maximal functional equivalence. Minimal functional equivalence is the lower degree of adequacy, and it can be stated as “the readers of translated text could conceive of how the original readers understand and appreciate the text by their own comprehension” (Nida, 1993:87). On this level, the faithful conveyance of language and indicated information in the original text is not only the most basic principle but also the top priority in all translation tasks. The maximal functional equivalence can be defined as “the readers of translated text could be able to comprehend and appreciate it in the same manner as the original readers did”, which is the ideal state of translation and can be hardly achieved, especially when there is huge difference in the cultural and aesthetic value between source and target languages.

In a word, the Functional Equivalence Theory has profound and inspiring influence on the translation study around the world. And this theory has provided a new angle for translation studies in China by new concepts, ideas and methods, which also promotes the translation of foreign literary works.

### 3.3. The Development of Functional Equivalence Theory

The development of the Functional Equivalence Theory has undergone several stages. In fact, the concept of “equivalence” is not firstly proposed by Nida. In 1953, E. V. Rieu initially put forward the concept of “equivalence principle”. Later Nida developed it by adding his own understandings and in the early 1960s, Nida put forward two types of equivalence: formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. Formal equivalence suggests that source text and target text should be made in consistence with each other in form. However, translation methods based on this principle are proved to be insufficient later in translation practice as no versions can be totally equivalent with the original texts.

After years of further research, Nida published the book *The Theory and Practice of Translation* in 1969, in which he reaffirmed the significance of dynamic equivalence and gave a clearer definition about it: “Dynamic equivalence is therefore to be defined in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language” (Nida, 1969:24). Although it makes up for the deficiency of “formal equivalence” to a certain extent, the term “dynamic” was often misunderstood to refer to something that only has great impact, and someone believed that if a translation bring enough influence, it is no doubt the typical example of “dynamic equivalence” (Nida, 2002: 91). In order to avoid this misunderstanding and to emphasize the concept of functional. Nida replaced “dynamic equivalence” with “functional equivalence” in the book *From One Language to Another* in 1986. Although the title has changed, the essence and main idea of “functional equivalence” remain nearly the same, requiring equivalence both in form and content. Nida also pointed out that content should be preferred to form in the situation where both of them couldn’t be satisfactory at the same time.
As the core concept of Nida’s translation theories, Functional Equivalence Theory was widely accepted by domestic scholars when it was firstly introduced into China. In the translation of different texts, the basic requirement for translators is always the faithful delivery of the original message. However, expressions with intense cultural implication frequently appearing in ancient Chinese poems can be hardly understood after being translated into other languages. Aiming to solve this problem, this essay explores how to produce more high-quality translations of “Spring, River, Flower, Moon, Night” and which English version is better under the guidance of Functional Equivalence theory.

In fact, Nida has shared his understanding about poem translation on the basis of functional equivalence: The fully adequate translation of a lyric poem normally requires almost a “new poem” on the same subject, and the translation of a poem into something which is not a poem is anyhow not a functionally equivalence. That is to say, functional equivalence also exists in the translation process of poems. According to Nida, the equivalence of translation consists of three aspects: meaning, style and culture, which is in accordance with the basic requirement of poem translation. It is believed that translators can produce basically authentic translation at least from the three aspects above under the guidance of functional equivalence theory. In the process of translating poems, the theory requires that translators should firstly try to find the linguistic equivalents, and then the style.

4. Analysis of Functional Equivalence in “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River” Translated by Xu Yuanchong and W. J. B. Fletcher

The Functional Equivalence Theory emphasizes the response of receptors, which is of great significance in helping target readers appreciate the charm of “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River”. In fact, Nida and Xu Yuanchong share similar attitudes toward the standard of poem translation. Just as Nida pointed out, translation is a process of reproducing the closest natural equivalent in the receptor language in terms of meaning and style. Xu Yuanchong also gives priority to readers acceptability. His translation criteria of poems are featured by “Three Beauties”: sound, sense and style, enabling readers to appreciate the translated poem in a similar manner as original readers do and thus achieving functional equivalence. Therefore, Xu Yuanchong’s translations are often able to reproduce both of the form and spirit of the original poem, which maintain the consistency in artistic effect and readers’ response. W. J. B. Fletcher was the first translator to publish the English translation of Tang poetry in the world, whose version seems more popular among foreign readers.

4.1. Functional Equivalence in Meaning

Referring to Functional Equivalence Theory, meaning is always the most important element in translating the original text. Xu Yuanchong argues that literary translation should be faithful to the original intention and a good translation is equal to creation, but is not free translation but “following your heart and also not overstepping the bounds”. This requires the translator to ensure “Functional Equivalence” in meaning. Even if translators want to do creative translation, they must do it on the basis of equivalence.

When translating the poem “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River” into English, both translators made great efforts to reproduce the meaning to the readers. This paper tries to compare the two
translators’ works so as to analyze their translation of meaning, focusing on meaning, form and style.

Example 1:

The Chinese title: 春江花月夜

Xu Yuanchong’s version: A Moonlit Night on the Spring River

W. J. B. Fletcher’s version: Moon Thoughts

In the poem, the images of spring, river, flower, moon and night are all mentioned. However, which one is the most important? After reading carefully the original Chinese text, it is not hard to find that the “moon” should be especially focused. The poet pays much attention to the “moon” and expresses his feelings through the “moon”. Xu’s translates the title into “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River”, which describes a scene of moonlit night besides the river in line with the functional equivalence in meaning. While Fletcher uses the fuzzy translation method to mention thoughts of moon night, without caring about the fantastic moonlit night scenery. Yet, what the former part of the original poem describes is scenery not thoughts. In this way, the author ventures to say that Fletcher violates the principle of Functional Equivalence Theory, and thus Xu Yuanchong’s version is surely better.

Example 2

The Chinese original:

鸿雁长飞光不度，鱼龙潜跃水成文。

Xu Yuanchong’s version:

But message-bearing swans can’t fly out of moonlight.

Nor letter-sending fish can leap out of their place.

W. J. B. Fletcher’s version:

The wild swans and the geese go sailing by.

But rob not any brightness from the sky;

And fishes ripples on the water pleat.

In the Chinese cultural background, “鸿雁” and “鱼龙” are the symbols of letters and message from relatives and families far away, carrying deep family affection, care and thoughts. Xu translates a “鸿雁” to “message-bearing swans” and “letter-sending fish” to express the connotation of the letters from home in line with the principle of functional equivalence in meaning. While Fletcher just uses the images of “swans, geese and fishes” to replace “鸿雁” and “鱼龙” in the poem. For one thing, Fletcher makes it easier for readers to understand the content of Chinese poem. For another thing, he doesn’t fully express the meaning of the original context, failing in meeting the principle of functional equivalence in meaning.
4.2. Functional Equivalence in Form

After analyzing two translators’ use of words and expressions which help to convey the meaning of the poem, another important element, form will be discussed here to see how they deal with the most special feature of “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River”.

In the process of Chinese poetry translation, one should try his best to convey the original form and let the readers appreciate the original forms of foreign poems, and enjoy the beauty of the original. The classical Chinese lexical forms have strict patterns. Consequently, in the process of translation, the translator should pay attention to the form. The author tries to appreciate the two different attitudes to the original form by comparison.

Example 3:

The Chinese original:

滟滟随波千万里, 何处春江无月明！

Xu Yuanchong’s version:

She follows the rolling waves for ten thousand li,

And where the river flows, there overflows her light.

W. J. B. Fletcher’s version:

The Ocean’s face is radiant with her glory.

Xu’ translation of this sentence expresses the spectacular of sea and tidewater in accordance with principle of functional equivalence with unique expression and image. The underlined part “滟滟” was translated by different ways by two translators. Xu Yuanchong takes the explication approach, by translating it as “rolling”. While Fletcher uses the static word “is” is not enough to convey the moonlight’s flickering turbulence on the water. Moreover, two lines of the poem into one sentence violates the principle of “beauty in form” in poetry translation and the principle of functional equivalence.

Example 4:

The Chinese original:

斜月沉沉藏海雾, 碣石潇湘无限路。

不知乘月几人归, 落月摇情满江树。

Xu Yuanchong’s version:

The moon declining sinks into a heavy mist;

It’s a long way between southern rivers and eastern seas.

How many can go home by moonlight who are missed?

The sinking moon sheds yearning over riverside trees.
W.J.B. Fletcher’s version:

(The moon is sinking to her western hall,)

Darkened and drooping in the sea mists’pall.

From thee to me I cannot tell how far!

How many with the moon home wandered are

I cannot tell-But as the shadowy trees

Stir on the stream with sighings sad and lone,

So sighs my soul to thee, my own, my own!

Xu Yuanchong’s version is more in harmony with the rhythm of the original poem. Every line is almost of the same length. Each section is mainly in iambic and every two lines are rhymed. All this make the version more readable. Xu’s version meets the requirements of functional equivalence in form. The sentences in Fletcher’s version are all uneven in length. And he puts the poem fully into another new style of English poetry with strong personal feelings. It is not easier for foreign readers to understand what the poem meant due to its obscure form.

4.3. Functional Equivalence in Style

Since “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River” is an ancient Chinese poem, the translator should also pay attention to the original style, try to inherit and carry forward the literary style of that time. In the poetry translation one should spare no efforts to convey the distinctions between different cultures reflected in the poems. Translation aims to communicate, and literary translation is to introduce foreign culture, enrich their own culture, and promote the development of local literature. Therefore, the translation of style is always more desirable especially in poetry translation.

Example 5:

The Chinese original:

江天一色无纤尘，皎皎空中孤月轮。

Xu Yuanchong’s version:

No dust has stained the water blending with the skies;

A lonely wheel like moon shines brilliant far and wide.

Fletcher’s version:

The fleckless sky meets with the stainless sea:

And wheel-large floats in vast eternity

The moon upon the flawless crystal sky.
The poet describes the moon in exquisite detail, expressing moonlight, the river and the sky combined together. In the former sentence, it is not accurate for Xu to use dust as subject, which breaks the style of the original text. With elegant modifiers, Fletcher cleverly use “fleckless” and “stainless” to express “无纤尘”. He also uses “meets with” to express “一色”, retaining the style of original text. Therefore, in the translation of this pair of sentence, Fletcher’s version seems more acceptable and accurate in terms of functional equivalence in style.

Example 6:
The Chinese original:

昨夜闲潭梦落花, 可怜春半不还家。

Xu Yuanchong’s version:

Last night he dreamed that falling flowers would not stay.

Alas! He can’t go home, although half spring has gone.

Fletcher’s version:

Last night, when dreaming, ah, I seemed to see

That many flowers had fallen by this stream,

And low I moaned, Already spring will flee

And I can barely see thee in a dream.

The style of this poem is kind of “sorrow without injury” and “resentment without hate”. When the poet describes the woman who misses her husband very much, he uses such words as “愁”, “相望”, “梦落花”. However, the poet does not mention that the woman has strong feelings of sadness or resentment. Normally speaking, when Chinese ancient women missed their husbands, they did not speak frankly like western women, but expressed it through various ways. In the translation process the translator should not violate social reality (Zhang Jin and Zhangning, 2005). Fletcher is an expatriate who is less influenced by Chinese culture, so he uses the word “moan” to express the woman’s mood, which violates the graceful and restrained style of the original text. However, Xu’s version better keeps the style of the original poem, expressing the feeling of indescribable sadness in an indirect way.

5. Conclusion

Poetry is a kind of literary form that reflects human emotions. The language used in poetry is concise, elegant and full of beautiful artistic conception. Poetry is characterized by rich human imagination and beautiful rhythm. Moreover, it is closely linked with the culture of various nationalities. It requires the translator to understand the original accurately, to express the translation fluently, and finally to reproduce the situation of the original poem as much as possible.

Based on Nida’s functional equivalence theory, this paper explores the English translation of “A Moonlit Night on the Spring River” by Xu Yuanchong and W. J. B. Fletcher from three aspects:
Xu Yuanchong advocates “Three Beauties” in sense, sound and form. So Xu’s version pays more attention to the beauty of words, connotation and rhyme. In contrast, due to different cultural background, Fletcher’s version focus on the atmosphere, artistic conception and true feelings of the original poem instead of rhyme and form. By comparing the two English version form Xu Yuanchong and W. J. B. Fletcher, the author thinks that Xu’s version is probably easier to understand for most readers in line with the principle of Functional Equivalence Theory.

References
