

Rigorous and Appropriate: On Zhou Jianxin's Translation of Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson (Poems 301-600)

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Abstract: The controversy on form similarity and spirit similarity, as well as on pursuit of truth and pursuit of beauty have always existed in China translation field. It is controversial for translators on whether translation should first of all be similar in form or in spirit, and whether translator should first seek truth or beauty. In fact, form similarity and spirit similarity, and pursuit of truth and pursuit of beauty are not two extremes of incompatibility like water and fire, nor are they two opposites. With an eye on relationship between “form similarity” and “spirit similarity,” and between pursuit of truth and pursuit of beauty, Mr. Zhou Jianxin's translation of Dickinson's poems is to be analyzed to illustrate his translation style and characteristics.

1. Form Similarity and Spirit Similarity, Pursuit of Truth and Pursuit of Beauty

Controversy on form similarity and spirit similarity, and the debate on seeking truth and seeking beauty have long lasted in China translation field. It is controversial for translators on whether translation should be first of all similar in form or in spirit, and whether translator should first seek truth or beauty. Xu Yuanchong, a famous translator, claimed that “the main contradiction in literature translation in 20th century China is, in my opinion, the contradiction between literal translation and free translation, between form similarity and spirit similarity, between faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance (or faithfulness, expressiveness and excellence) and faithfulness, expressiveness and felicity.” He also pointed out that, in translation, “seeking truth is a low standard and seeking beauty is a high standard.”^[1] In fact, form similarity and spirit similarity, and pursuit of truth and pursuit of beauty are not two extremes of incompatibility like water and fire, nor are they two opposites. The “best approximation”^[2] proposed by Gu Zhengkun, a famous scholar, emphasizes that form similarity and spirit similarity are of equal important. Besides, Xu Yuanchong also emphasizes that “translating poems should convey beauty of meaning, sound and form of the original poems as much as possible without distortion of truth, so that readers can know, like and enjoy them.”^[3] Therefore, it can be concluded that “form similarity” and “spirit similarity”, “pursuit of truth” and “pursuit of beauty” complement each other rather than oppose to each other.

2. Emily Dickinson and the Translation of Her Poems in China

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) is regarded as pioneer of modern American poetry. Harold Bloom, a famous American critic, once said that “Except for Shakespeare, Dickinson manifests more cognitive originality than any other Western poets since Dante.”^[4] For Dickinson, “Poetry is her strength and glory.”^[5] In her lifetime, she had written more than 1800 poems. Since Dickinson's collection of poetry was first published in 1890, study of Dickinson has spanned a century and lasted for more than 100 years.

Although translation of Emily Dickinson's poetry in China started relatively late, it has yielded fruitful results so far. The first translated collection of Emily Dickinson's poems was published in 1980s, and by 2011, 11 translated collections had been published, in which a total of 1076 Dickinson's poems had been translated into Chinese. Of the 11 collections, Jiang Feng's translated version maintains largest sales volume and widest influence.^[6] In December 2017, another Chinese translated version – *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson(Poems 301-600)* was published.

Zhou Jianxin, the translator, has devoted himself to Emily Dickinson studies for many years. Zhou's translation will undoubtedly promote Dickinson's research and popularization in China. In view of the relationship between "form similarity" and "spirit similarity", and between "pursuit of truth" and "pursuit of beauty", Zhou Jianxin's translation is analyzed in the following to illustrate his translation style and characteristics.

3.Zhou's Translation Style: Rigorous and Appropriate

Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson(Poems 301-600) is Mr. Zhou's second translation anthology of Dickinson's poems in sequence, which contains 300 poems, i.e. poems 301-600. Like his first translation anthology, it adopts a contrastive English-Chinese bilingual format, and with great consideration, provides explanations or annotations to difficult poems in the book. This is also a bright spot that distinguishes Zhou's version from previous translated versions by other translators. It also reflects Mr. Zhou Jianxin's rigorous, down-to-earth, modest and cautious attitude towards scholarly studies. Unlike those selected in the first translation anthology, poems with "obscure theme, obscure meaning of words and sentences, jump or break of grammatical logic"^[7] in this anthology undoubtedly make translation job more difficult.

Reading through the translated book, it can be found that Mr. Zhou Jianxin adheres to translation principles of "rigorous comparison, graceful language and appropriate expression", resulting in rigorous and appropriate translation which faithfully reproduces style of the original both in content and form. The following poem 303 is an illustrative example:

303^[8]

The Soul selects her own Society-	灵魂选择自己的伴侣--
Then - shuts the Door-	然后--把门关闭--
To her divine Majority-	对于神圣的多数--
Present no more-	她再也不理--
Unmoved - she notes the Chariots - pausing-	不为所动--她发现车辇--停在--
At her low Gate-	她低矮的门前--
Unmoved - an Emperor be kneeling	不为所动--一位皇帝跪在
Upon her Mat-	她的草垫--
I've known her - from an ample nation-	我曾见她--从一个人口众多的国家--
Choose One-	选择一个--
Then - close the Valves of her attention-	然后--封闭关心的门阀--
Like Stone-	像石头--

The above translation demonstrates typical style of Zhou's translation: rigorous and appropriate.

3.1 Punctuation

Punctuation plays an important role in Dickinson's poetry. Yet Dickinson's use of punctuation usually deviated from traditional rule. The above poem contains as many as 17 short line symbols (or, dash). The extensive use of short horizontal symbol (or, dash) is a feature and symbol of Dickinson's poetry, and its role is often reduced to indicating pause. For example, in the second and penultimate lines, the word "Then" is closely followed by a dash. In the second line, "then" also indicates a progression. The short pause caused by "then" and the following dash constitute a sharp contrast between the word "selects" before and the word "shuts" after, indicating a progression from one extreme to another, that is, the soul first makes choice, and then, closes the door. On the one side, the soul is opening itself to make choice, and then, on the other side, it closes the door after choosing is done. In the penultimate line, pause caused by dash after "Then" plays similar role. The word "choose" in the former line and the word "close" after the "Then" in the present line imply a

relationship between selection and closure. Through “Then” at the beginning of this line and the dash following it, the antagonistic relationship between “open” and “close” is clearly highlighted and sublimated. The use of the two dashes implies uneasiness and sadness of soul from its opening itself to choose to its closing itself for self-admiration. Zhou's translation retains all of the 17 dashes in original poem, which results in high similarity to original text in terms of form, facilitating a closeness to flavor of the original, retaining the charm of the original. And so this kind of similarity in form may help Chinese readers understand Dickinson's unique form and style of writing.

3.2 Rhyme scheme

Although Emily Dickinson was deeply influenced by hymns, and most of her poems followed hymn style, her poetry still embraced very unique characteristics, for example, her metre is changeable and diverse. Some of her poems employ rhyme, yet some other are without rhyme, which makes it difficult for readers to identify a fixed rhyme pattern in them. In the above example, the original rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef, that is, the odd and even lines of each stanza are rhymed separately. Mr. Zhou Jianxin's translation adheres to principle of faithfulness and almost reproduces the rhyming pattern of the original poem in his choice of right words for proper rhyme, and so his translation reproduces well the rhythmic beauty of the original, which demonstrates translator's rigorous attitude and great effort in the process of translation. Zhou's translation enables Chinese readers to experience the charm of the rhythm of Dickinson's poems and gain excellent reading experience.

3.3 Diction

The phenomenon of polysemy and ellipsis can often be found in Dickinson's poems. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Dickinson's poems are obscure and difficult to understand. Mr. Yu Guangzhong, a very well-known translator and poet, once commented on brevity of Dickinson's poetry language as “her poems have no decorations, have bones but no flesh, and everything is made by cutting with sharp knife”^[9]. For example, in the third stanza of the original poem mentioned above, the second and fourth lines use two words as “Choose One—” and “Like Stone—” respectively to constitute a verb-noun structure, which is concise and powerful, conveying to readers the uniqueness of choice and the resolute attitude of the narrator. Here, Zhou's diction is friendly and simple by translating them into “选择一个”(Xuanze Yige), “像石头”(Xiang Shitou), which takes Dickinson's concise and brief style fully into account, smoothly reproducing the conciseness of the original text and the narrator's stubborn and clear personality and firm attitude.

With regard to the translation of whole poem, Mr. Zhou Jianxin's translation is “rigorous and faithful, more in line with the original poetic connotation, and vividly displays Dickinson's concise and brief, delicate and implicit, and unconventional style of poetry.”^[10] Mr. Zhou Jianxin's translation embodies concretely translation principle of “form similarity” and “spirit similarity” in terms of style and form. His choice of words are concise and brief, thus reflecting a well combination of “pursuit of truth” and “pursuit of beauty” in translating, and maintaining both the charm of “beauty of meaning” and “beauty of form” in his translation.

4. Conclusion

Mr. Zhou Jianxin's translation maintains greatest faithfulness to original poems, striving for “form similarity” and “spirit similarity”, and makes unremitting efforts in terms of faithfulness and expressiveness. And in terms of “elegance”, Mr. Zhou Jianxin does not confine himself to the “shackles” of the original poems and managed to “dance” in his own way. Mr. Zhou Jianxin's choice of words in translation is usually cordial and simple, but without losing its tension. His style is fluent and concise. He tries his best to preserve the original flavor of source texts. The beauty of original poem is also reproduced to a higher degree in his translated poems, so that “pursuit of truth” and “pursuit of beauty” are well combined. *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson(Poems 301-600)* is undoubtedly an excellent translated version with distinctive traits.

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