

# Research on the Name and Nature of Song Translation

Qin Jun

College of Foreign Languages and Cultures  
Sichuan University  
Chengdu, China  
qinjunfanyi@126.com

**Abstract**—Until quite recently, song translation has not been paid enough attention in translation field, not only because of its vague discipline which both involves translation studies and musicology, but also the obscure name and nature of song translation. This article attempts to distinguish the different types of song translation and to define the types with standard terms by revealing the nature of song translation (as poetry translation and as singable translation) with pentathlon principle ie. sing-ability, sense, naturalness, rhythm, rhyme proposed by Peter Low. Through investigation and a case study, this article concludes by suggesting a singable translation should be defined “song transdubbing” and future studies should cover this type not only by descriptive but also systemic approach.

**Keywords**—Name and nature; Song translation; Song transdubbing; Pentathlon principle

## I. INTRODUCTION

The greatest German musician Ludwig van Beethoven once said, “Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and all philosophy (Musik ist höhere Offenbarung als alle Weisheit und Philosophie)” [Xiang, 2017:1]. Music is “spiritual food” shared by human beings, an art of expressing emotions and a culture. Nowadays, the world has become a “global village” which makes more frequent exchanges of the music circles between different countries. Excellent western songs keep coming to China, and Chinese classical songs now are also going out to the western world. In this “come-in-and-going-out” process, translation plays a significant role. As we all know, there are two types of music: instrumental music and vocal music. Instrumental music refers to a musical composition or recording without lyrics, or singing [1]. Most often the music is produced by musical instruments and can be perceived by people in various countries without translation. The vocal music is different and it is the music form of singing by human voice to express emotions with lyrics. Therefore, the lyrics of different languages should be translated to make foreign audience understand the meaning of the words, so to make sure the lyrics can be fully appreciated and the songs can be fully appreciated. For example, that the 2016 Disney movie “Moana” came to Chinese film market and got high box office is necessarily the success of song translation. Because there are 18 theme songs in the film, and those songs are well translated into Chinese singable versions to make sure the Chinese audience can understand the movie theme. The famous song translator Xue Fan points out, “Only when songs translated to

people’s mother tongue can songs help enhance the understanding of different nations, ethnic peoples, and help strengthen the international communication and friendship” [Xue, 2002: 42]. Song translation has been a common phenomenon in people’s daily life, while studies on translation still seem not to be paid much importance to. The following table shows the publications of papers on song translation studies in the past five years in the influential journals in China from the data in CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure).

TABLE I. PAPERS IN JOURNALS IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS

Year	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013
Number	0	1	1	0	0

From the table it can be seen only two papers on song translation studies have been published in the influential journals in China. Here the two papers were respectively published on Foreign Language Research and Foreign Language and Literature. Not a single paper has been published in other influential journals on translation studies like Chinese Translators Journal, Shanghai Journal of Translators, Foreign Language Teaching and Research, Journal of Foreign Languages, Foreign Language World, Modern Foreign Languages and other major university journals.

Table II below shows master and doctoral dissertations on song translation studies in the past five years.

TABLE II. DEGREE DISSERTATIONS IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS

Year	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013
Number	4	2	4	3	3

There are only 16 dissertations were written on song translation studies in the past five years. Situation is not much better in the western research circle. No more than fifteen papers on song translation studies have been found since 2000. Papers on song translation studies can only be found in two journals [2], The Translator and Perspectives: Studies in Translatology. Therefore more attention should be paid to song translation studies both in China and in the western world about what terms are appropriate when describing song translation in detail, what song translation does now and what will it cover in the future, and what nature it is of song translation.

## II. CLASSIFICATION OF SONG TRANSLATION

Because of what we have discussed in the introduction part, there are still no standard terms in song translation studies. In the west terms like “song translation” and “adaptation” are used, and in China “song translation”, “lyrics translation”, “song translating and matching”, “main points of lyrics” are commonly used without distinction most often. Researchers themselves are sometimes confused about these terms when used to refer to its translation practice. Xue Fan [2002: 31], in his book *Song Translation: Exploration and Practice*, stated bluntly that “I know the term ‘song translation’ is not quite appropriate from scientific aspect, but I have to temporarily use it before a better term is found”.

Talking about giving standard terms that involve song translation, first and foremost the classification of song translation should be talked about. As we know, all translating has a purpose in the process, so does song translation. In song translation some of the target texts are meant to be sung by singers, some to read [3], some to act as introduction text for a performance. Johan Franzon [2008: 373-99] in his article *Choices in Song Translation*, suggests that a song translator may have five options in theory:

*not translating the lyrics,*

*translating the lyrics without taking the music into consideration,*

*writing new lyrics,*

*adapting the music to the translation, and*

*adapting the translation to the music.*

He further stated that the process of translating is the process of making choices. In doing song translation the translator has five choices as the following shows:

- (1) Leaving the song untranslated;
- (2) Translating the lyrics but not taking the music into account;
- (3) Writing new lyrics to the original music with no overt relation to the original lyrics;
- (4) Translating the lyrics and adapting the music accordingly – sometimes to the extent that a brand new composition is deemed necessary;
- (5) Adapting the translation to the original music.

The first option “leaving the song untranslated” can be regarded as the translator’s task, for (s) he is to decide whether the song needs to be translated, but since the action of translating does not happen, it cannot be considered as a translation [4]. The second and third options belong to translating the lyrics into a text. Research may argue that the third option “writing new lyrics to the original music with no overt relation to the original lyrics” belongs to no translating, but according to the idea that translating means to convey the main idea and spirit, the third option also belongs to translating work. Johan Franzon said “with no overt relation to the original lyrics” may mean that the translated lyrics are “with covert relation to the original lyrics”. When we try to define whether a

text is a translation to the original text, we have to seek to find whether there exist intertextuality between the translated text and the original text or not. If there is, however more or less, the translated text should be regarded as a translation. The fourth and fifth options show the translator translating the lyrics into a target language taking the music into account, which is what most song translating work means. With this analysis, song translation should be regarded as a hypernym that includes all song translating work, like translating with music restriction and translating without music restriction. Therefore the classification of song translation can be shown in the following figure [5].

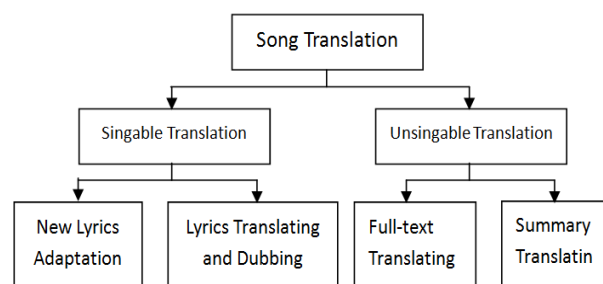


Fig. 1 Classification of Song Translation

From the figure above, it can be seen that songs are at times translated into another language to be sung and at other times are translated only for reading or reciting as a text or subtitles. Therefore, when a translator is asked to do a song translation [6], (s) he has to find out what purpose the translation work is to seek. Peter Low [2006] summarized five main functions that a song translation may have:

- (1) To be sung in the target language,
- (2) To be spoken as an introduction to the original song,
- (3) To be read in a recital program or a CD insert,
- (4) To be studied by the singer preparing to perform the song in the source language,
- (5) To be displayed as surtitles while the song or opera is being performed, or as subtitles on a videoed performance.

Among all these five functions, “to be sung in the target language” is the most difficult translating work a song translator handles. In other words, it is the singable translation that makes song translation special and unique in this interdisciplinary field. And as is shown in figure I, a singable translation with its meaning equivalent to the original lyrics should be named “Lyrics Translating and Dubbing”, because only lyrics can be and need to be translated while music cannot and need not be translated. Since the purpose of the translation is to be sung in the target language, to make the translated lyrics match the pre-existing music the translator should adapt the translation to music. This process is called “dubbing”. The word “dub” refers to “create, add to or replace the soundtrack of (a film), esp in a different language” as is shown in *Oxford Advance Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary* [1997]. So “dubbing” here is appropriate in describing the process. “Lyrics

Translating and Dubbing” should be the term for singable translation and the following tries to tell its characteristics.

### III. AS POETRY TRANSLATION: LITERARY GENRE

Poetry, prose, novel and drama are the main literary genres. Songs are the combination of lyrics and music, and when it is sung it is a song, when it is written it is a lyric text. From this respect, lyrics are a kind of musical literature and belong to poetics. In ancient times, many classical songs were composed with music from poems, such as, *Ode to Heroes* from George Byron, *Auf Flügeln des Gesanges* from Christian Johann Heinrich Heine, *Песняблоче* from Mussorgsky Modest Petrovich, *Auld Lang Syne* from Robert Burns and so on. So lyrics translation in deed is poetry translation. That is why lyrics translation is difficult to handle. Like Coleridge said, “poetry is the best words in best order” [C. Liu, 2005: 8-19]. Poetry translation (translation of the best words in best order) is a painstaking task and a hard nut to crack [7].

As is known to all, the famous criteria for translation are Yan Fu’s “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance”, Peter Newmark’s “communicative translation and semantic translation”, Eugene Nida’s “Functional Equivalence”. But for poetry translation, the “Three Beauties” principle proposed by Xu Yuanchong is of priority, namely, the translated version should touch the readers’ hearts as the original, that is the beauty in sense; the translation should bears the same melodious rhyme scheme as the original, that is the beauty in sound; the translation should keep the original’s form as close as possible, that is the beauty in form [J. Qin, 2009: 9]. Lyrics translation should also follow this principle to make sure the beauty of sense, sound and form are faithfully represented in the target language. To achieve these requirement, three strategies should be applied in the translating process. 1) To transplant the sound quality. What makes a poem or a song? The sound quality and the sense. In order to keep the flavor of the original song, the sound quality should be represented in the target lyrics. But this is not easy doing, for translating the meaning is much easier than transplant the sound. So re-creation and adaptation play important role in handling the problems. 2) To transplant the image and sense of the original lyrics. It is the image and sense that make a song is good or not. What needs to mention is that the translator should make sure the image and sense not be destroyed for the sound purpose. 3) To transplant the form. Forms here often refers to the line patterns in a poem or song. When the forms are kept in the target language, the genre is kept. So to keep the forms is to keep the genre.

### IV. AS SINGABLE TRANSLATION: PERFORMANCE GENRE

Songs are not only a literary genre but also a performance genre, because they are called “songs” they must be sung and performed, or they cannot be called “songs” but “poem lines”. The main purpose for song translation is to make the translation singable in another language. As is talked above, lyrics should be translated and then dubbed according to the music, which we may name “transdubbing” for the process. As the music cannot be translated, the translator “is subject to huge, multiple constraints imposed by the pre-existing music, which has its own rhythms, note-values, and stresses that one cannot

simply ignore. Besides, the text often rhymes, and so rhyme is often desirable in this kind of song-translating (though not in others)” [P. Low, 2006: 512]. Peter Low further proposed a Pentathlon Principle which means when transdubbing a song five “events” should be considered, namely, singability, sense, naturalness, rhythm, and rhyme. Singability can be judged by the singer who is to sing the translated song. Do the lyrics match the music tone? Does the lyric stress place on the music stress? Sense means does the translated lyrics keep the original meaning and content? “Unnaturalness in translate texts often seem to involve gratuitous processing effort on the receptor audience’s part: perhaps due to of the receptor language, from the original language or insufficient mastery the expression used by the translator may turn out to require more than optimal processing cost on the audience’s part” [Guff, 1991: 389]. So naturalness means the translated song should be comfortable to listen for the audience, smooth in expression and easy to be comprehended. Rhythm and rhyme can be judged from the poetic aspect. Does the rhythm have rise and fall in the translated lyrics and do the rise and fall match the rise and fall of the music tune? Since end rhymes are very important in song singing, do the line ends rhyme with each other? These questions should be answered by the translator(s).

As for singability, it also means when a lyrics text is transdubbed into a foreign language, the number of the syllables in the target lyrics should be the same of the number of the syllables in the original lyrics with the purpose of matching the tones of the pre-existing music. Here is an example of lyrics transdubbed from English (Bob Dylan’s *Blowin’ in the Wind*) into Chinese.

#### Blowin’ in the Wind

1=F  $\frac{4}{4}$

Lyrics: Bob Dylan

Translation: Qin Jun

5	5	5	6	6	6		5	3	2	1	•	5		5	5	5	6	5	4		5-	
How	ma-	ny	roads	must	a	man	walk	down	be-	fore		you	call	him	a	man?						
nán	rén	yào	jīng	lì	duō	shǎo	mó	nán	,	cái	suàn	zhēn	zhèng	nán	zī	hàn?						
5	5	5	6	6	6		5	3	2	1	•	5		5	5	5	4	3	3		2	---
How	many	seas	must	a	white	dove	sail	be	--	fore		she	sleeps	in	the	sand?						
bái	gē	yào	fēi	yuē	jī	zhòng	hái	yang	fàng	néng	ān	xiē	yú	hǎi	tān?							
5	5	5	6	6	6		5	3	2	1	•	5		5	5	5	6	5	4		5-	
how	many	times	must	the	can-	non	balls	fly	be	--	fore	they're	for-	ev-	er	banned?						
dà	pào	yào	fā	chū	duō	shǎo	méi	pào	dàn	zhàn	zhèng	cái	yī	qù	bù	fān?						

Fig. 2 Example of Lyrics Transdubbing

It is not easy to find that each syllable of the English lyrics is put into one Chinese character (one Chinese character carries one syllable) to match the music tones. Furthermore, the original lyrics rhyme by [æn] with the words “man”, “sand” and “banned”, so do the translated lyrics by [an] with the Chinese character “han”, “tan” and “fan”. Except for singability [8], the translated lyrics should also keep the meaning and sense of the original one. In this example, the literal meaning of the three lines of the Chinese lyrics is:

*How much hardship must a man endured before he becomes a real man?*

Original lyrics: How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man? Here “to walk down many roads” is put into “to endure hardship” which translate the deep meaning.

*How many seas must a white dove fly over before she rests in the sand?*

Original lyrics: How many seas must a white dove sail before she sleeps in the sand? Her “sleep” is put into “rest” with almost the same meaning.

*How many cannon balls will be fired out before a war stops?*

Original lyrics: How many times must the cannon balls fly before they’re forever banned? Here “they’re forever banned” is put into “a war stops” which tells the implying meaning.

From the back-translation message, we can see the Chinese lyrics greatly keep the original sense. Though the meaning does not 100% equal to the original one, it carries the spirit of the source lyrics, which is often the result of free translating. To sum up, it can be said that the Chinese lyrics here achieve the Pentathlon Principle to a large extent.

## V. CONCLUSION

To get singable translated lyrics, the translation should 1) preserve the music notes, rhythms and rhymes, 2) be natural, smooth, and idiomatic in the target language, 3) reproduce the spirit and keep the meaning of the original lyrics, 4) have appropriate stresses, vowels, pauses to express emotions. In short, this process of restricted translating and matching can be named “lyrics transdubbing”.

Translation is an art, lyrics transdubbing is an art of “dancing in fetters” which needs re-creative work but meanwhile is restricted within the pre-existing music. With creation, imagination and restriction in mind, song translators will transdub more songs of different nations to enhance mutual understanding and friendships.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Y. Xiang, The Art of Song Dubbing. World Publishing Corporation, 2017, pp.1-2.
- [2] F. Xue, Song Translation: Exploration and Practice. Hubei Education Press, 2002, pp.42.
- [3] J. Franzon, "Choices in Song Translation: Singability in Print, Subtitles and Sung Performance", The Translator, Volume 14, 2008, pp. 373-99.
- [4] P. Low, Song Translation, Elsevier Ltd., 2006, pp.512.
- [5] Oxford Advance Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary, The Commercial Press, 1997, pp.448.
- [6] C. Liu, On the Translation of Rhyme and Rhythm. Journal of Language and Literature Studies, vol 6, 2005, pp. 8-19.
- [7] J. Qin, The Losses and Gains in Poetry Translation, Chongqing University, 2009, pp. 9.
- [8] A. Gutt, Translation as Interlingual Interpretive Use, The Translation Studies Reader, London and New York: Routledge, 1991. pp. 389.