

# A Contrastive Study on Three English Versions of Han Hong's Poem *Hanshi (Cold Food Day)*

## ----From the Aesthetic Perspective

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**Abstract:** Three English versions of Han Hong's poem *Hanshi(The Cold Food Day)* are compared and studied from the aesthetic perspective. The merits and demerits of each version are appraised based on Xu Yuanzhong's Three-beautification theories. It is found that each version has its advantages and disadvantages, and no version is perfect in conveying the beauty of the original poem in sense, sound, and form. Comparatively speaking, Xu Yuanzhong's version is better in sound and form, while Hu Zhuanglin's version is better in conveying the real meaning of the original. The study has, to some extent, revealed the translators' strategy and style of translation. The result indicates that Xu Yuanzhong has better practiced his Three-beautification theories in the translation of the poem, but it is a great pity that sometimes certain losses in sense cannot be avoided as a price for the pursuit of beauty in sound and form.

**Key words:** English version; comparative study; Han Hong; *The Cold Food Day*; aesthetic perspective

### I. Introduction

Han Hong, a poet from NanYang (in present Henan ) in the Tang Dynasty, was a successful candidate in the highest imperial examinations in the Tianbao period of the Tang Dynasty, and one of the "Ten Genius in the Dali Period." [1] His poems are mostly composed for the purpose of socialization or as reply to other poets. And *Hanshi (The Cold Food Day)* is one of his famous poems widely read by people.

The poem describes the scene in the capital city of Tang Dynasty, Chang'an and that around the royal palace on the day as a tradition to eat cold, ready-made food by avoiding cooking food with fire in memory of the famous military strategist Jie Zitui in the Chunqiu period, who was killed in the mountain by lighted fire. [2] The poem has been translated into different languages. Here, three English versions translated by Hu Zhuanglin, Xu Yuanzhong, and an anonymous translator, respectively, are selected and compared from the aesthetic perspective in order to study how well each version has conveyed the beauty of the original in sense, sound, and form, and to offer basis for the translation of other ancient Chinese poems into English. According to Xu Yuanzhong's Three-beautification theories, a translation that is beautiful in sense, sound, and form can be called a successful one, and it is the translator's duty to preserve the beauty of the original and create beauty in sense, sound, and form in the translation. And only in this way can the true beauty of the ancient Chinese poetry be transmitted and appreciated by readers of the target language. Thus, I will compare the three versions from three

aspects: sense conveying, sound conveying, and form conveying based on Xu Yuanzhong's Three-beautification theories.

### II. Contrastive study of the three versions from the aesthetic perspective

#### A. Conveying of the sense

The beauty of the ancient Chinese poetry, first of all, lies in the sense, or the meaning the poet intends to express through the description of the scenery or physical things. The physical things with emotional implications are called images. As is known to all, poetry is intended to express the poets' feelings under different situation. These feelings may be love, hate, joys, anger, sorrows, fears, desires, likes or dislikes. In most cases, poets are not just describing the things in the environment, but expressing their feelings or emotions through the images. To convey the beauty of a poem, therefore, lies, first of all, in the understanding of the original poem. However, different people may understand the same poem differently. Anyway, there must be an understanding closest to what the poet intends to express. What a translator should do is to convey as closely as possible what the poet intends to express under the then situation, the time, the location, the scenery, etc. These factors may all contribute to the composition of a poem and thus help the understanding of it. In other words, the social background of the poet may offer the readers a clue for the right understanding of a poem, when we cannot get a clear and direct understanding from the text of the poem itself.

Han Hong's famous poem *Hanshi( Cold Food Day)* in fact describes a beautiful scene of the capital city Chang'an on Cold Food Day in late spring: willow trees in the imperial garden are swaying in the gentle eastern breeze and their catkins flying everywhere like flowers; when dusk approaches, candles are begun to be sent out from the Han Palace to the privileged or the favoured lords of the Emperor, and light smoke begins to rise from the Palace to the mansions of the great lords. The first two lines describe the general daytime scene, while the last two lines offer a special dusk scene. It is special just because on such a special day while all households should observe the tradition of prohibiting fire and smoke and eating cold food for three days in memory of the famous military strategist Jie Zitui, the Palace and the favoured lords, who can get permission or even privileged royal candles and

fires from the Emperor, can be exceptions! Under such great contrast we should say it must be sarcasm or at least some sort of irony. However, the poet is so skillful in his power of word choice and description that throughout the poem, within the four lines of twenty-eight Chinese characters, he does not use any word to make any comment on this, merely focusing on the description of the beautiful scene on that special day. It seems that the poet is not admonishing against the special rights the royal family and the favoured lords are enjoying but singing a praising song of the beautiful scenery of the capital city brought about by the imperial willow trees and the honours brought about by the Emperor's privilege candles to the lords, and this implied peaceful life is closely related to the royal power. Perhaps the poet has no intension at all of demonstrating anything. Even if he is really doing so to the emperor against the special rights the favoured lords are enjoying, his attitude are very mild, reserved, and roundabout and thus easy to accept by the rulers. And that's why later Dezong Emperor, who liked this poem so much, appointed him with a very important position of drafting the imperial edict, which has been passed down by people as an anecdote of a poet winning an important position just by a poem.

In translating a piece of literary work, a poem in particular, the key point is to convey fully and exactly the meaning of the original in the target language. Avoiding of meaning loss should be the priority of translators. And a translation without loss in meaning should be an ideal one. Now let's compare the following three versions of Han Hong's poem *Hanshi*, translated by Hu Zhuanglin, Xu Yuanzhong, and an anonymous translator, respectively.

#### Version 1:

##### ***"Cold Food" Festival***

*All over the Capital catkins flew wantonly,  
A scene of the spring so significant:  
On "Cold Food" the east wind willfully  
Made the imperial willows slant.  
Now as the dusk approached quietly  
Within the Han palace candles glowed  
Towards the five mansions of nobility  
The silvery smoke of the tapers flowed. [3]*

**Tr. Hu Zhuanglin**

#### Version 2:

##### ***Cold Food Day***

*Nowhere in vernal town but sweet flowers fly down;  
Riverside willow trees slant in the eastern breeze.  
At dusk the palace sends privilege candles red  
To the five lordly mansions where wreaths of smoke spread. [4]*

**Tr. Xu Yuanzhong**

#### Version 3:

##### ***After the Day of No Fire***

*Petals of spring fly all through the city  
From the wind in the willows of the Imperial River.  
And at dusk, from the palace, candles are given out  
To light the mansions of the Five Great Lords. [3]*

**Tr. Anon.**

First, let's see the translation of the title of the poem first.

In Version 1, it is translated as "Cold Food" Festival, and the word "festival" usually refer to "a programmed series of related cultural events," in view of the cultural aspects and the tradition of prohibiting fire and smoke and eating cold food for three days in succession, this word may be the best choice for the three-day special occasion. In Version 2, it is translated as "Cold Food Day," referring to that particular day on which cold food is served, and moreover, referring to that particular day on which the poet saw the above-mentioned scene. In this sense it is the most accurate word for the Chinese equivalent "Hanshi." In Version 3, it is translated as "After the Day of No Fire." In fact, "Hanshi" is so called just because fire and smoke should be forbidden, and food should be prepared beforehand and served cold during the three successive days. Therefore, it is also called "No Fire Day, or "No Smoke Day." After the three cold food days, it is the Pure Brightness Day on which people can make fire to cook food and should go to the cemetery to mourn the dead with food and by burning the "paper money." As the poet mentions clearly in the second line of the poem that what he describes all happens within the special day of no fire, no smoke and having cold food, so we can see the anonymous translation of the title is obviously a mistranslation. And by contrast both Mr. Hu's translation in Version 1 and Mr. Xu's translation in Version 2 are good and acceptable.

Secondly, to make clear to what extent each version has conveyed the meaning of the original poem, let's examine the first two lines of the poem. By these two lines the poet describes a beautiful scene on Cold Food Day (Here, we just use Xu Yuanzhong's translation for the special day "Hanshi") · the two lines can be considered as an inverted structure and be understood as follows: on Cold Food Day the willow trees in the imperial garden are swaying in the eastern breeze and their catkins are flown out of the garden to everywhere in the capital city Chang'an basking in the warm late spring breeze. In the eyes of the poet such beautiful spring scenery in the capital city is closely related to the royal power for the flying catkins are from the imperial willow trees! It seems that all people in the capital city, or anywhere the catkins can reach, are basking in the grace of the royal power.

In Version 1, these two lines are translated as "*All over the Capital catkins flew wantonly, / A scene of the spring so significant:/ On "Cold Food" the east wind willfully / Made the imperial willows slant.*" The two adverbs "wantonly" and "willfully" are used vividly and figuratively to describe the naughty and playful "catkins" and the "east wind;" and to call the readers attention to this magnificent spring scene, the translator uses the word "significant," of course, the word is used also for the purpose of rhyming with the last word "slant" in the fourth line, as we are going to study in the following part of this article. And the fourth line of the translation gives us the impression of direct translation.

In Version 2, we can see translations of the two lines like this: "*Nowhere in vernal town but sweet flowers fly down; / Riverside willow trees slant in the eastern breeze.*" "Chuncheng" in the first line is translated as "vernal town,"

though it is not a small town, but a prosperous and large capital city! Then why? Of course, the translator has his reason to do so. The word “town” is used here instead of “capital” or “city” obviously because of the need for an internal rhyme with the last word “down” in this line. In translating Du Fu’s *Spring View*, the same technique is used by the same translator for the same purpose. The first two lines of the translated poem *Spring View* go like this: *On war-torn land streams flow and mountains stand; / In vernal town grass and weeds are o’ergrown.* And we will discuss it in detail later in this article about the sound conveying of the three versions. In the same line, the word “vernal” is a very poetic one which is often used by the translator Xu Yuanzhong to refer to many things related to the spring season. Like in his *300 Tang Poems*, phrases related to the spring season are often translated as “vernal wind or vernal breeze”, “vernal hue”, “vernal shore”, “vernal mud”, “vernal dream”, “vernal rain”, and “vernal flower” etc. What may cause controversy in the translation of the first line should be the treatment of “flying flowers”, as is translated as “sweet flowers fly down.” Many readers interpret the word “Hua” in this line as catkins of the willow trees, which are also considered to be a kind of flower, and are often mentioned by ancient Chinese poets in describing the spring scenery. The great poet Li Bai of the Tang Dynasty used the word “catkins” in his famous poem *Parting at a Tavern in Jinling*, and the poet Yang Wanli of the Song Dynasty describes a leisurely scene of children playing with catkins in his poem *Rising in an Early Summer Morning*.

Some scholars argue that there are no flowers at all in the northwest capital Chang’an since it is still very chilly at this time of the year on Cold Food Day! And they believe that the “Hua” here can only be catkins! On the other hand, many readers interpret the word “Hua” in this line as “flowers.” Some scholars even believe that at this time of the year there are many kinds of flowers since it is getting much warmer! It really takes a lot of knowledge and efforts to make sure what on earth this “flower” really refers to. However, from the context of the poem it is better to interpret it as catkins because it is most likely the catkins from the imperial willow trees that are flying in the east breeze. Besides, considering the light weight of the catkins, it is more logical to interpret the “flying flowers” as catkins. In this sense the translator of Version 1, by Mr. Hu Zhuanglin, does most faithfully. In the second line of Version 2, some losses in meaning are suffered because of the limited number of words used: the phrase “Hanshi”, as a very important word showing the time for the special occasion and an indicator on which the sharp contrast described in the last two lines is based, is not mentioned in the translation; and the implication of the grace from the royal power or the emperor must have been lost to some extent.

In Version 3, the first two lines are translated as follows: *“Petals of spring fly all through the city / From the wind in the willows of the Imperial River.”* “Hua” is translated neither as “flower,” the general image of spring, nor as “catkins,” the word with specific meaning, but as “Petals,” the coloured leaf-like part of a flower, a word usually with the implication of

sentimentality for the spring season when withered flowers and their petals are falling down, obviously this is not in agreement with the light-hearted mood revealed in these two lines. Like in Version 1 the sentence structure of double negation is not properly transferred, and the emphatic meaning is not faithfully conveyed. What’s more, the time indicator in the original poem is not mentioned in the translation at all, and, obviously, with some loss in meaning. On the other hand the word arrangement of the second line “From the wind in the willows of the Imperial River.” seems not very logical.

In the last two lines of the poem, the poet, shifting from the daytime scenery to the dusk scene, gives us an unusual picture of sending candles from the Palace to the favoured lords on the cold food day. It is unusual just because on such a special day when ordinary people are observing the tradition of prohibiting fire and smoke and eating cold food the royal palace and the Emperor’s favoured lords can get permission or even privileged royal candles and fires from the Emperor, can be exceptions!

In Version 1 these two lines are translated as follows: *“Now as the dusk approached quietly / Within the Han palace candles glowed / Towards the five mansions of nobility / The silvery smoke of the tapers flowed.”* The translation has to a great extent expressed the meaning of the two lines in the original poem, it can be said to be faithful to the original poem. The tradition of awarding candles to the favoured lords by the emperor as a kind of grace is not mentioned directly but implied in the difference between the candles used in the Han palace and the tapers, thin candles, used in the five mansions of nobility, showing their different ranks. We can say this must be a very creative and clever way. And the word “silvery” is very poetic word often used by poets to refer to moonlight, light smoke or things of white color. For instance, in the poem *Silver* by Walter de la Mare, the word “silver” altogether appears ten times in the fourteen lines of the short poem, mostly referring to the moonlight or the white color. Here it is used vividly to refer to the light smoke of the tapers.

In Version 2 the last two lines are translated like this: *“At dusk the palace sends privilege candles red / To the five lordly mansions where wreaths of smoke spread.”* On the whole the information in the last two lines of the original poem has been conveyed in the translated version. However, the use of the word “privilege” seems to have ruined the implicit atmosphere of the original poem as the privilege or the special rights the palace and the lords enjoy are not stated but described and implied in the description. To be faithful in transmitting the beauty of the original work the translator has the duty to reserve as much as possible the taste or the atmosphere of connotation of the original in the translation so that the readers of the target language can be left as much room as possible for thought. Of course, due to the difference in culture and ways of expression between the source language and the target language, this may present great challenge to literary translators. This is particularly true with ancient Chinese poetry translation, for images and their implicit meanings or connotations form the very important part of the atmosphere

and thus the beauty of the ancient Chinese poetry. The quality of the translation certainly lies in the faithful translation of them to a large extent. For example, in Ma Zhiyuan's *Autumn Thoughts*, the beauty of the poem just lies in the abundant use of a succession of images — dry vine, old tree, crows, bridge, stream, cottages, ancient road, west wind, and lean nag[5]—expressing the desolation of the atmosphere and the loneliness of the travellers. In translation of these images if the implicit meanings or the connotations are stated directly but not implied in the use of corresponding images with the same or similar meanings in the target languages, the beauty of the original poem will be ruined.

In Version 3 these two lines are translated as follows: “*And at dusk, from the palace, candles are given out / To light the mansions of the Five Great Lords.*” The meaning is mostly transmitted. However, the verbs in the two lines are not well dealt with. In line 3 the active verbal phrase in the original is translated into a passive structure “candles are given out,” and the implication has changed from a kind of honour or grace from the emperor into some sort of duty to be distributed among the group of great lords. In line 4 the verbal phrase and the noun phrase in the original is simply translated into an infinitive phrase “To light,” and the vivid picture of the light smoke (implying the emperor's favour or the privilege of the lords) spreading from the palace to the mansions of the five great lords disappears in the simple action of “to light.” Of course, in this translation the readers in the target language can not appreciate the beauty in the atmosphere the poet has created with efforts in the original poem.

#### B. Conveying of the sound and form

The poem *Cold Food Day* by Han Hong is a typical seven-character quatrain, following the strict level-oblique tone pattern and rhyme scheme. It is not only beautiful in sense but also in sound and form. Next let's reexamine each version to see to what extent each version has transmitted the beauty of the original poem in sound and form.

In Version 1, the seven-character quatrain of four lines is converted into an octave of eight lines with five to seven words in each line. Though the beauty in sense of the original is well preserved, the use of too many words seems to have, to some extent, devalued the quality of the translation in form, when taking into account of the number of Chinese characters (28) used in the original poem and that of the English words used in the translation (51). On the other hand, the dominant iambic foot pattern and the a-b-a-b-c-d-c-d rhyme scheme have produced better musical sound effect and kept the verse form of the original.

Version 2 can be considered beautiful in both form and sound because the quatrain form of the original is preserved and fewer English words (35 words) are used than in version 1 and 3, and the dominant Alexandrine trochaic foot pattern with an equal number of twelve syllables in each line and the a-b-c-b rhyme scheme, though not perfect, have produced the best rhythm and musical sound effect. Besides, the internal rhyme in line 1 (“town” and “down”) and in line 2 (“trees” and “breeze”) have helped to strengthen the pleasant musical

sound effect of the translation.

As for Version 3, though the quatrain form of the original is kept and not too many words are used (37 words), the less obvious foot pattern, lack of end rhyme scheme and the unequal number of words and syllables used in each line have greatly devalued the quality of the translation both in form and sound effect.

### III. Conclusion

By comparing the three versions of Han Hong's poem *Han Shi (Cold Food Day)*, and by analyzing the merits and demerits, it is found that the translator of Version 1, Hu Zhuanglin, has kept, to the greatest extent, the beauty in sense of the original poem, and the obvious foot pattern and the strict end rhyme scheme have helped to produce better sound effect. However, in terms of form, though the use of the octave have well preserved the verse form of the original, the use of too many words and the change of the quatrain into octave, and the unequal number of words and syllables in each line have, to some extent, devalued the beauty of the poem in form. On the other hand, the translator of Version 2, Xu Yuanzhong, has, to a larger extent, preserved the beauty of the original poem in sense though there are some losses in conveying the meaning because of the pursuit of the beauty of translated version in form and sound, which is a great contradiction in poetry translation and sometimes unavoidable. Of course, either in form or in sound Version 2 can be considered to be the best among the three versions for its obvious foot pattern, end rhyme scheme, internal rhyme, and the equal number of syllables in each line. Therefore we can say that Xu Yuanzhong, as a great translator and the advocator of the Three-beautification theory, has made great efforts to put into translation practice his theories in poetry translation. It is also found that the anonymous translator of Version 3 has not produced a desirable translation due to the losses in sense conveying, the demerits of losing the beauty of the original in verse form, and the failure of producing the pleasant sound effect with poor foot pattern and rhyme scheme.

So it can be concluded that it is no easy job to produce an ideal translation of ancient Chinese poetry. There is almost no perfect translation of any literary work. To produce a piece of translation with beauty in sense, sound and form is a very demanding job that tests the translator's understanding of the original work, command of the target language, and the ability to express and to bridge the difference in the two cultures. Only the translation will last long that can transmit and preserve the beauty of the original in sense, sound, and form.

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