

A Comparative Study on Translations of *Bian Cheng*—A Literary Stylistic Approach

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Abstract

“Bian Cheng”, a representative work of ShenCongwen, has fully demonstrated Shen’s unique writing style—the “native soil” style—through his dealing with language. The present paper studies two English versions of “Bian Cheng” with a literary stylistic approach to examine how its originality and freshness can be preserved and recreated in translation. The detailed discussion covers both lexical and syntactical aspect, and introduces a particular situation translators may confront in translating literary texts—“deceptive equivalence”. It is found that the avoidance of lexical redundancy, careful arrangement of sentence structures and the dealing with “deceptive equivalence” are of vital significance in literary translation especially when the unique literary style should be preserved.

Keywords: literary translation, stylistics in translation, deceptive equivalence.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Bian Cheng” (meaning “border town”), a modern pastoral published in 1934, is a representative work of ShenCongwen (1902-1988), one of the most influential writers in the 20th century China. Shen was the founder of a unique Chinese school of “native-soil” or “rural” literature. His writing style is fully manifested in “Bian Cheng” which depicts a love tragedy between Cuicui, the granddaughter of the old ferryman, and two sons of the wharf-master. Ethno-cultural elements in West Hunan could be found everywhere in the book among, idyllic visions combined with an exquisite painterly style are easily detected, and among all, the pure kindness of human beings was highly extolled in the unique writing style. Previous studies have touched upon various translations of “Bian Cheng”, but the research on the stylistic aspect is insufficient. Since the uniqueness of Shen’s style is the exact reason of the work’s huge success, the present study seeks to examine how the style can be best preserved by comparing its two translated versions.

2. “Bian Cheng”, the translations and its research

“Bian Cheng”, as a representative work of ShenCongwen, has attracted attention from home and abroad, both in fields of literary study and translation. Up till now, it has been rendered into English in four

different versions by Emily Hahn and Shing Mo-lei in 1936; Chingti and Robert Payne in 1947; Gladys Yang in 1981 and Jeffery C. Kinkley in 2009. Many studies over its translations are conducted as well ever since the publication of the book. The following are some representing examples:

Li Yanrong (2004) focused on the translation of ethnological words and expressions from the comparative-aesthetic perspective by comparing Chingti and Robert Payne’s translation and Gladys Yang’s translation. She made it clear that three methods are used by translators to properly deal with the ethnological words: literal translation; transliteration combined with semantic translation and semantic translation; Liu Lian and Jian Gongyou (2012) studied Gladys Yang’s version under the guidance of “the principle of beauty in three aspects”—a theory put forward by Xu Yuanchong—to analyze the translation from the principles of “beauty in sense, sound and style”; Xiang Rengdong (2012) adopted Skopos Theory to analyze the 1947 and 1981 translated versions respectively; and Liao Yangjia (2013) introduced a linguistic concept—fuzzy language—to assess Gladys Yang’s dealing for better preservation of aesthetic beauty of the source text.

These studies mentioned above demonstrate that scholars and translators have strived to recreate a “border town” in English speaking countries. They are positive and beneficial trials indeed, yet the author still noticed some imperfectness:

“Bian Cheng”, as a literary masterpiece, deserves the preservation of the literary beauty in translation. Some of the papers chosen above overlooked this fact to a large degree. For instance, Li Yanrong (2004), though advocating the aesthetic beauty, has put too much focus on common translating strategies which could be well applied in translations of any type, overlooking the features of literary translation. Although the literary beauty of the source text was indeed discussed, the ways many scholars assessed it are not objective. Skopos Theory adopted by Xiang Rengdong (2012), for example, could be subjected to serve any purpose; Liu Lian and Jian Gongyou (2012), though believing translation should be conducted under the “the principle of beauty in three aspects”, remained rather vague in determining what beauty is except describing what they felt. Besides, some of the scholars only treated the source text as ordinary literary text, and did not pay much attention to Shen Congwen’s unique writing style combined with exotic cultural elements in West Hunan Province, as demonstrated in the paper of Liao Yangjia (2013).

Given this, the paper chooses literary stylistic perspective to grasp the literary significance of “Bian Cheng,” for it approaches literary texts with objective linguistic methods. To provide a more comprehensive vision, the present paper chooses to compare translations of Gladys Yang, one of the top translators in China; and of Jeffery C. Kinkley, a professor of Chinese history at St. John’s University and a ShenCongwen specialist. These two English versions of “Bian Cheng” are thus believed to be superb in quality and highly representative.

3. Literary stylistics and its application in translation studies

Style is a complex concept, and till now no agreement has been reached concerning its nature. It can be interpreted as characteristics of the use of language found in a particular genre or period of literary writing; it can also be viewed as habitual traits of the author. The academic discipline of stylistics can be simply put as the study of style.

Four key aspects of literary stylistics can be summarized from various definitions as follows:

1. Analysis of literary texts;
2. Application of linguistics (the study of language);
3. Discussion of texts according to objective criteria rather than pure subjective and impressive values;
4. Emphasis on the aesthetic properties of language.

Scholars from abroad have taken the lead in

applying stylistics to translation, which can be dated back to ancient Rome. As stylistics grew and defined itself as a discipline from around the middle of the twentieth century, there were many attempts to explore its relationship with the study of translation. During this period, Jakobson enjoyed a high reputation, for he was not only central to the development of stylistics, but also to the study of translation. Stylistics with a cognitive element which developed very recently also had an impact on translation.

Since 1980s, the study of stylistics has been introduced to China. Ever since then, numerous research has been conducted in China over its application to translation studies. Shen Dan has blazed a trail. She probed deeply into this area and contributed a lot in introducing literary stylistic approaches to translation studies in China. She also published many articles in translation journals, covering the significance of applying stylistics to translation, the concrete methods, and more importantly, always the possible challenges scholars are going to confront and may well convert into opportunities. Under her guidance, other scholars such as Liu Shisheng also devoted themselves to this academic field (2002).

Theoretical studies can only gain momentum alongside surging attempts in practice. Scholars and students in recent years have experienced trials and errors by applying stylistic approaches to literary translations of different kind, from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, from *Red Mansion’s Dream* to short stories written by Lu Xun, to name just a few. There has been huge progress, but there is still much room for discussion.

The role of style in translations is made complex by the fact that there are styles of two texts, the source text and the target text, to take into account. And in each case, the style of the text can be seen in its relationship to the writer, as an expression of choice, or in its relationship to the reader, as something to be interpreted and thereby to achieve effects.

Taking all these into consideration, Jean Boase-Beier (2014) looks at style in translation from four aspects:

- a) The style of the source text as an expression of the author’s choices.
- b) The style of the source text in its effects on the reader (and on the translator as reader).
- c) The style of the target text as an expression of choices made by its author (who is the translator).
- d) The style of the target text in its effects on the reader.

Due to the limit of time and space, only one level has been chosen by the author to conduct research—how the style of the target text has been reproduced by the translator.

4. “The Translators’ Choice”—a comparative analysis of two versions

As mentioned, the application of linguistics is of vital importance to the study of stylistics; hence, in applying stylistics to translation, linguistic methods should also be adopted.

The author chooses lexical and syntactical level as basic units for analysis, because the writer’s intentions and feelings are carried in his or her careful choosing of words, and aesthetic losses can result from the translator’s failure to take full account of literary functions of syntax. Apart from these two linguistic aspects, an important concept is also worth noticing in applying stylistics to translation—“Deceptive Equivalence.” The author also touches upon this concept in efforts to examine the translations.

4.1 Aspects of lexical expression

Words, as the basic elements of writing, are direct manifestations of a writer’s intention and feelings. Shen Congwen is a master of words in that he can always use as few words as possible to convey complicated emotion. As for the two selected translations of “Bian Cheng” in this study, it is found that the sentence length in J. C. Kinkley’s translation in most cases outmatch that of Gladys Yang’s, and this is mainly due to Kinkley’s choice of redundant words. Here is an example:

ST (source text)

细雨还依然落个不止，溪面一片烟。(89; ch. 8)

TT (translated text)

A light rain falls steadily, the stream is misted over. (Gladys Yang, 2013:88).

It was still drizzling endlessly and a layer of mist hung over the creek. (J. C. Kinkley, 2009:74)

This sentence is one of the most often cited sentences in the whole book of “Bian Cheng”. Fourteen Chinese characters alone have succeeded in depicting a melancholy scene. It is not easy to reproduce such beauty in a few words, but Gladys Yang has managed to achieve the same effect. It is a balanced combination in that one short sentence is in active voice, another in passive; one verb is dynamic, another one is static.

4.2 Aspects of syntax

In the translating process, translators need to be aware that syntax is often chosen or manipulated to generate literary significance. The failure to take full account of literary functions of syntax can result in aesthetic losses.

4.2.1 Syntax and pace

As syntax is largely responsible for the connection between major events or for minor but determinant details of the ongoing events, syntactic

organization may act in various ways upon the pace of the narration and the emotion changes the writer intends to convey. An example is provided here:

ST:

后来看看天快要黑了，军人扛了长凳出城看热闹的，皆已陆续扛了那凳子回家。潭中的鸭子只剩下三五只，捉鸭人也渐渐的少了。落日向上游翠翠家中的那一方落去，黄昏把河面装饰了一层薄雾。翠翠望到这个景致，忽然起了一个怕人的想头，她想：“假若爷爷死了？”(43; ch. 4)

TT:

The soldiers who had brought out benches were carting them home again. Only a few drakes were still at large on the river, while the number of their pursuers was dwindling too. As the setting sun fell on the girls home upstream, a fearful thought crossed her mind, “can granddad be dead”? (Gladys Yang, 2013:42).

All the Soldiers from the town who would come hefting benches to watch the commotion had shouldered them now and returned home, one by one. Only three or four ducks remained at liberty in the river. The number of people chasing them was dwindling, too. The sun was setting, in the direction of Cuicui’s home upstream. Dusk draped the river in a thin coat of mist. A terrible thought suddenly occurred to Cuicui as she surveyed this scene: “Could grandpa be dead”? (J. C. Kinkley, 2009:39).

The old ferryman leaves Cuicui alone to watch the boat racing and drake catching, while he falls into a drunken sleep after chatting and drinking with an old friend. With the merry gathering grows colder and the scene more desolate, Cuicui can sense the accumulation of fear and solitude inside her heart, which all of a sudden turns into an appalling suspicion—the death of her grandpa. Still, Shen’s dealing with the pace of narration needs to be taken into account when doing translation—a slow picture drawing followed by a sharp surge of emotion in contrast. Kinkley’s version has outdone Gladys Yang’s in this respect, for he has rendered six sentences, almost each shorter than the previous one, to depict the desolate scene; and concluded this part with a single sentence describing Cuicui’s suddenly rising fear. Thus, Shen’s intention in the source text has been successfully recreated.

4.2.2 Syntax and prominence

A most crucial function of the syntactic hierarchy is to represent different degrees of importance attached to different parts of the message. The success of a translator’s task in this aspect rests essentially on his or her correct contextual inference and on finding the appropriate syntactic choice. In literary texts, however, attention must also be directed to some seemingly “unimportant” or “redundant” description,

which in most cases tends to bring out the true literary and aesthetic value of the text. For instance:

ST:

代替了天，使他在日头升起时，感到生活的力量，当日头落下时，又不至于思量与日头同时死去的，是那个伴在他身旁的女孩子。(9; ch. 1)

TT:

Fate, in his case, is the girl at his side who makes him feel the lure of life at sunrise and stops him from brooding about death at sunset. (Gladys Yang, 2013:8).

It was the girl keeping him company who was Heaven's agent, letting him feel the power of life as the sun rose, and stopping him from thinking of expiring along with the sunlight when it faded at night. (J. C. Kinkley, 2009:11).

This sentence introduces the old ferryman—Cuicui's grandpa—and his tie with Cuicui. The structure of the Chinese sentence seems to suggest that "the girl is important," which can be sufficiently conveyed by Kinkley's emphasizing structure. However, what is more important is the hidden information. Shen intended to convey—"how is the girl important." With the parallel structure in the attributive clause, Gladys Yang successfully grasped the description; while Kinkley's description is not strong enough to convey the emotion in an "-ing" particle clause.

4.2.3 Transference of parallelism

In Chinese writing, parallelism in various forms constitutes one of the most frequently used rhetorical devices. Though appearing at the syntactical level, it also bears significance in phonological and semantic explanation. Here lists an example:

ST:

“白鸡关出老虎咬人，不咬别人，团总的小姐派第一……大姐戴副金簪子，二姐戴副银钏子，只有我三妹莫得什么戴，耳朵上常年带条豆芽菜。”(85; ch. 8)

TT:

"The tiger eats the captain's daughters first; Most girls have gold and silver for their hair; Poor Emerald is the one who comes off worst—No trinkets, nothing but bean-sprouts to wear!" (Gladys Yang, 2013:84)

"The tiger at White Rooster Pass feasts on people And he'll get the militia captain's daughter first. Sister No.1 wears a pair of gold hairpins, Sister No.2, a pair of silver bracelets, But Sister No.3, little me, has no jewelry to be found; Just bean-sprout earrings, worn all the year round." (J.

C. Kinkley, 2009:70)

What Cuicui chants here sounds much like a poem featuring parallel structures. It is found that the meaning in Gladys Yang's translation is briefly condensed into four sentences with parallel structure still at work and the rhyme and rhythm of the original was recreated even in patterns of English poetry: the first line shares the same rhyme with the third; and the second, the fourth. These are what Kinkley failed to achieve.

4.3 "Deceptive Equivalence"

"Deceptive Equivalence" is a concept brought up by Shen Dan. It refers to the loss of aesthetic effect of language due to some translators' negligence in noticing the "skillful manipulation of language for aesthetic effects or to create a certain texture and tone which serves to reinforce or modify themes and meanings." (Shen Dan, 1998: 91) As mentioned previously in Chapter Three, Shen Congwen wrote about local folks in West Hunan Province, whose culturally-bound language forms part of Shen's writing style—"native-soil" or "rural" literature. To see whether this style has been preserved in translation or simply lost in the situation of "Deceptive Equivalence", the following discourses are chosen for analysis.

ST:

吊脚楼上唱曲子声音热闹了一些，只听到下面船上有人在说话，一个水手说：“金亨，你听你那婊子陪川东庄客喝酒唱曲子，我赌个手指，说这是她的声音！”(45; ch. 4)

TT:

The singing in the houses grew louder, and a boatman on a junk closed by remarked: "Jinting! Isn't that your girl singing to some fat Sichuanese while he swills his wine? Like to bet on it?" (Gladys Yang, 2013:44).

As the strains of song coming from the stilt houses grew louder, she heard talking on a boat below, and a boatman saying, "Jinting, listen, that's your whore, singing to some merchant from Sichuan while he drinks his liquor! I'll bet a finger on it, that's her voice!" (J. C. Kinkley, 2009:40).

Boatmen frequent Shen's novels and essays, forming unique scenery with their rather "rude" or "coarse" language due to little education. Shen captured this language characteristic and truly depicted them as who they were. Kinkley's "whore" can be viewed as bold, yet nonetheless described the true discourse. On the contrary, the euphemism carefully chosen by Gladys Yang—to substitute "whore" with "girl"—appears unnecessary and undesirable. What's more, "bet a finger on it" seems closer to the original context than the regrettable adaptation "bet on it".

5. CONCLUSION

The present study chooses two translations of “Bian Cheng” and adopts a literary stylistic approach to examine how Shen Congwen’s writing style can be preserved and recreated. Translations of Gladys Yang and Jeffery C. Kinkley have been closely studied in a comparative manner. Through the comparative study, it is found that two translators have made great efforts to deal with words and sentences in order to preserve the original style of “Bian Cheng”; however, there are still some translations that can be improved. Several suggestions in light of literary stylistics are provided here for a better future in literary translation.

1. Lexical redundancy should be avoided to achieve a concise and powerful translation.
2. In terms of syntax, the coordination of sentences is of vital importance. Various sentence structures should thus be used according to different needs, be it to achieve pace change, prominence for emphasizing, or parallelism for aesthetic effects.
3. Translators should start translating after a thorough understanding of the writer with his language features so as to preserve the originality and uniqueness of the source text.

However, this paper is far from satisfactory. Due to the limit of time and space, the author could hardly cover every aspect of the stylistic approach, nor could the author include more versions of translations to reach a more comprehensive conclusion. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the literary stylistic approach could enjoy wider application in translation studies, and the interdisciplinary research will lead to fruitful

achievements.

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