

The Creative Poetry Translation Method from the Perspective of the Cultural Turn — Longfellow's *A Psalm of Life* as a Case Study

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Abstract—*A Psalm of Life* is a well-known poem written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and it has been translated into many different versions since the Qing Dynasty. From the 1980s, translation studies have focused on the cultural aspects rather than the literal equivalence. The new perspective takes into account how the translated version is adapted and accepted and influences the target culture. This paper, based on the cultural turn perspective, examines the theoretical background of translation research and analyzes a translated version of *A Psalm of Life* in light of the target language and culture. This paper concludes that the creative translation method in English-Chinese poetry translation is reasonable and innovative.

Index Terms—English-Chinese poetry translation, the cultural turn, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *A Psalm of Life*, the creative translation method

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and His Poems in China

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) was the leading writer in the realm of literature in the 19th century in the United States. His poems are very popular in the United States and are praised across Europe with more than twenty translated versions. Longfellow's works are rooted in the native history and culture, and they also inherited European traditional literature and thoughts. His works have significant influence on American culture and literature (Baym, 2007). On the website of Maine Historical Society, the special page introduces Longfellow's life and his diverse works (Longfellow, 2014).

Being a master in the realm of American literature, Longfellow's works have caught the attention of Chinese language and literature masters, such as Hu Shi, Wu Mi, and Guo Moruo, since it was introduced in China by Dong Xun in the Qing Dynasty. Furthermore, these masters' literary writing styles were deeply affected by Longfellow. Hu Shi translated Longfellow's *Daybreak* in the form of ancient Chinese five-character poetry. Wu Mi adapted Longfellow's narrative poem *Evangeline A Tale of Acadie* to a Chinese classic drama named *Romance in Chaotic Years*. In his article *My Experience of Poetry Writing*, Guo Moruo stated that his perception of the new form of the modern poetry was inspired around 1913 when he read Longfellow's *The Arrow and the Song*. Further, Guo held that Longfellow's poem was so concise and fresh that he felt he had not met with the new form of the modern poem until then. In 1943, Hu Shi translated *The Arrow and the Song* into Chinese. In 1949, Huang Wu and Zhu Baoguang published the first Chinese version of *Selected Longfellow's Poems* with the pseudonym Jian Qizhi. Mu Dan, a distinguished Chinese poet, translated more than ten of Longfellow's poems. In 1993, Wang Baotong, an expert in English-Chinese poetry translation, translated Longfellow's *A Psalm of Life* into Chinese. The prestigious translator Yang Deyu translated Longfellow's poems several times, including *A Psalm of Life*. In the new 21st century, *A Psalm of Life* entered into textbooks in Chinese Elementary and secondary schools, and is regarded as a classical English poem among foreign poems.

Regarding the study of Longfellow and his poems in current China, it is easy to find substantial research about Longfellow's poems and comparative studies between Chinese contemporary writers and Longfellow. In the field of poetry research, Mao (2006) analyzed the spread of Longfellow's poems in China; Liu (2007) explored Longfellow's sonnets in detail; Zhao (2009) examined Longfellow's poem *The Song of Hiawatha* from the perspective of colonialism; Luo (2011) conducted a study on a Chinese version of Longfellow's *A Psalm of Life* in the Qing dynasty. All the above studies focused on the literal aspect of Longfellow's poems without considering the overall cultural background. Studies about the influence of Longfellow's poems on China's culture and society can be found, but most of them confined their study to the 1920s. For example, Fu (1991) compared Guo Moruo's poems with Longfellow's poems; Xie (2006) explored the influence of American poems on modern Chinese poems around the 1920s; Yang (2007) mentioned Longfellow's poems and writing style when he researched on Qian Zhongshu's translation method; Meng (2008) provided a panorama of English-Chinese poetry translation around the 1920s, signifying their impact on Chinese society and culture. Thus, it is clear that most of the current research on Longfellow's poems paid attention to the literal aspects

rather than the social and cultural context.

However, there is a gap between the domestic and the overseas research in Longfellow and his poems. Little is known about how the translated Chinese version of Longfellow's poems are adapted to the current Chinese culture and language features. In other words, it is seldom to find research about how Longfellow's poems were translated into Chinese from the perspective of the cultural turn. Consequently, it is necessary to conduct research on Longfellow's poems from the target culture and language. The purpose of this paper is to examine the latest Chinese version of Longfellow's *A Psalm of Life* in a Chinese elementary and secondary school textbook focusing on contemporary Chinese language and culture. Additionally, this research will serve as a sample for English-Chinese poetry translation based on the creative translation method.

B. The Cultural Turn Perspective of Translation Research

During globalization, all research should be conducted with a broader cultural scope. The aspect of culture plays an important role when considering background research. Translation research, the main branch of interdisciplinary research, cannot neglect the crucial role of culture. Translation does not deliver the single literal translation between different languages but considers the various meanings found in the different cultures. To some degree, translation indicates the extent to which the two different cultures merge. According to the historical record, western translation and translation theories have a history of more than two thousand years. However, being an independent subject, translation came into being around the late 1980s. Translation research is also a new born subject in the field of Academia in China. In the past few decades, translation research has been included in the study of linguistics. It became an independent subject ten years ago (Tan, 2012). Consequently, the current trend of translation research does not focus on the literal translation of the text any longer. In other words, the existing translation research explores its objects from the perspective of different cultural meanings. Bassnett and Lefevere (2004) focused on three aspects of translation research: the initiator of the translation task, the manager of the translation of the text, and the receiver of the translated text. Thus, Bassnett and Lefevere supported a higher level of translation method beyond the traditional literal equivalence standard. They considered more the spread and reception of the translated version in the new Chinese cultural context, and they examined the ultimate purpose and impact of the translation task in the light of cross cultural activity. This kind of cultural-turn point of view is a brand new perspective and fresh in the course of translation history.

There are diverse Chinese versions of Longfellow's *A Psalm of Life* since the Qin Dynasty and each of the versions has its own features and advantages. The purpose of this paper was to examine the characteristics of Longfellow's *A Psalm of Life* in the standard textbook in Chinese elementary and secondary schools from the perspective of the target language culture. Thus, this paper explored the feasibility of creative translation method in English-Chinese poetry translation.

II. CREATIVE TRANSLATION METHOD IN ENGLISH-CHINESE TRANSLATION

The new perspective of translation method has as its main concern for English-Chinese poetry translation exploring the original meanings in target cultures. Many scholars in English-Chinese poetry translation have explored and welcomed this cultural turn translation method. The origin of this method can be traced back to Huang Kesun's new English-Chinese poetry translation method, imitating the meanings and spirit of the original poems. Before analyzing Huang's method, it was necessary to discuss the translated English version of *Rubaiyat* by Fitzgerald (Shao, 2010). According to Shao (2010), the original version of *Rubaiyat* was a collection of selected poems written by a Persian poet Omar Khayyam in the 11th century. The translated version by Fitzgerald has been acclaimed as the best English version in the western literary world. The following is Fitzgerald's most well-known translation version of *Poem 12* in *Rubaiyat*:

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough'
 A Jug of Wine' a Loaf of Bread— and Thou
 Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
 Oh' Wilderness were Paradise enow! (Allen, 1903, p. 40)
 A literal equivalence translation version is as follows:
 I desire a flask of ruby wind and a book of verses'
 Just enough to keep me alive' and half of a loaf is needful:
 And then' that thou and I should sit in the wilderness'
 Is better than the Kingdom of a Sultan. (Allen, 1908, p. 31)

However, Fitzgerald changed the forms and arrangements of the original poems substantially, and even merged several original poems. Furthermore, Fitzgerald did not translate the original poems word by word but focused the translation on the cultural transmission. In a letter to his friend, Fitzgerald said that the translated version must be full of passion and vitality, and that even if the translation could not keep the original spirit fully, it should hold a part of the original essence between the lines. Fitzgerald put forward a vivid analogy: 'the translation should not be a dead eagle but a lively sparrow' (Shao 2010, p. 9). When Huang read Fitzgerald's English version during his study in MIT, Huang was moved by the spirit of the poems and planned to translate them into Chinese. Therefore, during his doctoral study, Huang translated the English version of *Rubaiyat* into Chinese in the form of ancient Chinese seven-character poetry. Huang's translation version is as follows:

一簞疏食一壺漿，
一卷詩書樹下涼。
卿為阿依歌瀚海，
茫茫瀚海即天堂。(Huang, 1989.)

To Huang's big surprise, his translation was praised and affirmed by Chinese literary scholars. Some of the scholars in translation research stated that Huang's translation was a stroke of genius in that he could combine the foreign language poem with the ancient Chinese poetry form successfully. The journey of the translations of *Rubaiyat*, from Persian to English, from English to Chinese, was like the revival of literature in different cultures. Qian Zhongshu declared that Huang's Chinese version was as good as Fitzgerald's English version (Luo, 2012).

From these evaluations, Huang illustrated in-depth comprehension of ancient Chinese poems and the extraordinary capability of translation. Regarding the translation method, Huang used the word "imitation" as his translation strategy on the cover of his works, signifying his difference from the traditional literal equivalence method. Huang did not explain his translation method in detail, but he held that the priority of his idea of translating poems was to rewrite poems (Shao, 2011). Shao (2011) stated that Huang's translation was a creative interpretation of the original poem based on its spirit. However, this interpretation was not a task without any guidance, but was based on the standard directed by the original version. If the translated was evaluated by the standard of the foreign language, the translated version was a high quality poem. In another article, Shao (2010) indicated that the quality of a translated version did not depend on the literal equivalence but the delivery of the essence of the original poem. If the translator's creativity was appreciated, the translated version would be the revitalization of the original (Luo, 2012). Li (2010) confirmed that the essence of English-Chinese poetry translation should be the delivery of the poem's spirit. Concerning the form of the translated version, the best form should be the one which was popular in the foreign culture. In sum, Li (2010) shared the similar opinions on how to translate English poems into Chinese with Shao and Luo. Regarding the title of the creative translation method by Huang, the word "imitation" implied his translation was different from the traditional literal equivalence and his humble ethos, a humble attitude even if his method was innovative. According to Chinese culture, Huang's remarks indicated his humility and reluctance to fight against the traditional trends or ideas. However, if we consider Huang's translation method from the international perspective, his new method could be named the Creative Translation Method in English-Chinese poetry translation.

III. HENRY LONGFELLOW AND HIS *A PSALM OF LIFE*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) is an important figure in the realm of American literature. He was a genius of language, and when he was thirty two he wrote his poem *A Psalm of Life* which was included into his first collection of poems *Voices of the Night* (Drabble, 2005). In 1854, after considering the balance between university faculty and devoted poet, Longfellow resigned his faculty position in Harvard University and committed to poetry writing. In his life time, he won the honorary doctorate degree from both Cambridge and Oxford universities (Wu, 2002). After Longfellow passed away, his statue was built up at the poet corner in Westminster Abbey and he was the only American writer who was honored there. He was the representative of fireside poets in the history of American literature (Fireside poets, 2014). The title of "Fireside Poet" implied the popularity of his poems across the nation and also demonstrated that his poems were concise and easy to recite. On the one hand, the themes of Longfellow's poems are traditional, optimistic, and passionate; on the other hand, the rhyme and rhythm are proper for reading and reciting. The fireside poets did not write poems for the sake of poems, but they preferred to write poems for the ordinary people, cultivating a wider audience.

From such a background, it is easy to identify the content and the theme of Longfellow's *A Psalm of Life*. This poem consists of nine stanzas with four lines in each stanza. Each line only has seven or eight words with short syllables. The rhyme form is ABAB. Therefore, reading or reciting his lines emits the power of the language: concise, forceful, and passionate. Throughout the whole poem, each word is used in daily life. Regarding the theme of this poem, it reveals an optimistic attitude toward life in that one need not regret the past misfortunes or miss the past successes. What one should do now is nothing but set up a goal and commit to the task step by step. Just as the poem said, "Learn to labor and to wait" (Longfellow, 1839). Therefore, when *A Psalm of Life* is translated into Chinese, what should be considered most should include both its language feature and its optimistic theme. If both language and theme can be delivered, the translated version will be a successful and creative work.

IV. THE CULTURAL TURN - BETRAYAL IN FORM BUT LOYALTY IN THEME

When Longfellow's *A Psalm of Life* was adapted into the textbooks in Chinese elementary and secondary schools, the content and the language changed a little. The original poem consists of nine stanzas and each stanza was written in the rhyme of ABAB. However, in the adapted version, the nine stanzas changed into five stanzas and four of them were cut off. In addition, in the translated five stanzas, the form of each stanza was not the same as the original one. In the original poem, every line was very short, containing seven or eight short words, and each line had similar length. While in the translated version, each line did not have share the same length. Further, each translated line was much longer than the original one. Regarding the foot of the rhyme, the original one was ABAB, but the translated one was rhymed

in the same pronunciation /ang/ (AAAA). One stanza of the translated version is as follows:

在世界这个辽阔的战场上，
在人生这个壮丽的舞台上，
我们不能做任命运驱使的牛羊，
我们要在战斗中当一名闯将。

(Longfellow, 2010)

If we examined the translated version from the traditional literal equivalence standard, this translation was not perfect, even unacceptable. However, this seemingly not-so-good translated version was confirmed and introduced to Chinese elementary and secondary students, because it thoroughly delivered the spirit of the original poem. Furthermore, the translated version followed the typical feature of Chinese language and culture. Thus, it is supported and welcomed by Chinese young readers. In contrast, the following is the translated version by Dong Xun in the Qin Dynasty:

扰扰红尘听鼓鞞，
风吹大漠草萋萋，
弩骀甘待鞭笞下，

骐驎谁能轡勒羈。(Li, 2012, p. 176)

The adapted translated version of *A Psalm of Life* demonstrated the features of Chinese culture and language and also delivered the essence of the original poem. The Chinese characters in the translated version were simple daily words, so that it was easy to read and recite. Second, although each line in the translated version was much longer than the original one, the translated lines could be divided into several parts according to where the reader paused. Third, the changed rhyme in the translated version was typical in traditional Chinese poems, so that the translated version was easily accepted by Chinese readers. For example, the pronunciation of the last character in each line was /ang/, which was one of the most popular rhymes in Chinese poem. When Chinese people recite this pronunciation, they open their mouth roundly and pronounce it with very long airflow. Thus, it is easy and convenient when one wants to recite the poem. Fourth, the first two lines and the last two lines within each stanza were written in parallel respectively. The use of parallel makes it possible to express the strong feelings in the readers' hearts. Therefore, in terms of form, content, rhyme, and spirit, the translated Chinese version reached Chinese readers' expectation, because it looked like a genuine Chinese poem with an optimistic spirit.

When we considered the essence of the original poem, we identified the western culture of the Christian tradition. In the first stanza, Longfellow wrote the line, "For the soul is dead that slumbers;" in the second stanza, Longfellow emphasized that "Dust thou art and to dust returnest." For western readers, these lines are similar to those in the Bible. When we read the third stanza, "Not enjoyment, and not sorrow," these lines remind us of the puritanism. In the last two lines in stanza six, the lines "Act, — act in the living Present! Heart within, and God o'er head" signify the relation between human beings and God. We can also find the shadow of Bible in the last stanza, "Still achieving, still pursuing, /learn to labor and to wait." In Bible, the words "labor" and "wait" contain deep meaning. Longfellow believed that every human being was a sinner since the moment of birth, so that every individual had to labor honestly if he or she wants to be saved by God (Li, 2011). From this analysis, it is clear to identify the relation between *A Psalm of Life* and the Bible, and this relation is the foundation of American culture. Thus, *A Psalm of Life* can easily enter into western readers' hearts and resonate with their beliefs and commitment in this world.

However, when we plan to translate this poem into Chinese, specifically adapt it to Chinese language and culture, we have to cut off some stanzas with the Christian beliefs. In Chinese culture, there is no element of Christianity but Confucius culture, Buddhism and Taoism. If the translator does not consider such cultural background and just keeps these lines in the translated version literally, the Chinese readers will feel uncomfortable and will not welcome it quickly. Therefore, the current translated version in Chinese elementary and secondary textbooks stands at a higher level beyond the restraint of the original culture, holds the theme tightly, stays true to the theme of optimistic attitude toward life. Thus, from the perspective of popularity and acceptance, the translated version of *A Psalm of Life* in Chinese elementary and secondary textbook is an excellent translation. In this way, *A Psalm of Life* is welcomed by more Chinese readers and becomes more popular in Chinese world. Without any doubt, this translated version will be welcomed and shared by more Chinese people.

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Henry Longfellow's *A Psalm of Life* has been translated and introduced to China for more than two hundred years. At the very beginning, the translated version by Dong Xun in the Qing Dynasty was written in complicated ancient Chinese which was little known by Chinese people. Later, there appeared several versions that adhered to the traditional literal equivalence standard. Unfortunately, the lack of considering the feature of Chinese culture and language contributes to the unpopularity of *A Psalm of Life* in China although there were complicated translated versions by distinguished translators. When Huang's creative translation method was utilized for E-C poetry translation,

Longfellow's *A Psalm of life* became very popular in China, illustrating the spirit of American culture. Therefore, from the cultural perspective, we find that the creative translation method widens the realm of translation research and provides an innovative insight into poetry translation. Just as Borges (2008) once said, "a language was formed over a very long time period, which was tested by time and promoted by farmer, fisherman, hunters, knights and etc. A language was not born in a library, but developed in the rural village, the sea, the crook, the long night, and the dawn (Chen, 2008). If Longfellow was alive, he would feel happy to see the prosperity and popularity of his *A Psalm of Life* in China instead of regretting the lack of original rhyme style and Christian elements.

This paper examined the Chinese version of Longfellow's *A Psalm of Life* in the textbook in Chinese elementary and secondary schools from the perspective of cultural turn. In this way, a new English-Chinese poetry translation method, the creative translation method was discussed based on Longfellow's *A Psalm of Life*. Thus, this paper illustrated a sample of creative translation method from the cultural turn in the contemporary world translation method. It is hoped that this study would provide a new perspective of language and literature research for both poetry translation and other branches such as novel, drama, and etc. Further, this paper indicates that the translated literature has become an indispensable part of Chinese literature. More in-depth research in Longfellow's poems will demonstrate the influence of Longfellow on Chinese literature. We hope the creative translation method in poetry translation from the cultural turn will contribute more to the exchange and acceptance between different cultures.

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