A Comparative Study of Two Chinese Versions of *The Fall of the House of Usher*

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* is one of the earliest and most famous horror stories. Its horrifying atmosphere, picturesque language, moving plot, image of death and degradation and even charm of horror itself all capture readers' hearts. This paper selects two Chinese versions of the novel and tries to compare them in the following aspects: selection of translation method, selection of word meaning and reproduction of ideorealm in the source text. Through the comparison, this paper aims at being helpful in literary translation henceforth.

Key words: *The Fall of the House of Usher;* Translation method; Word meaning; Ideorealm

INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe is an important American novelist, whose works influence not only the American literature but also the world literature. He receives praise from all over the world. Tennyson, a poet laureate, regards Poe as the most original American genius and Yeats, an influential poet himself, holds the view that Poe is the greatest American poet and a great lyric poet of the world (Cao, 2008). Poe is best known for his poetry and short stories, particularly his tales of mystery and the macabre. Widely regarded as a central figure of Romanticism in the United States and American literature as a whole, he was one of the country's earliest practitioners of the short story. Poe is generally considered the inventor of the detective fiction genre and is further credited with contributing to the emerging genre of science fiction. He is also famous for short stories of gothic genre, most of whose themes are horror and death. The destruction of beauty, the horror of death, depression, suspicion and fear about the weird phenomenon are the everlasting theme in his works.

The Fall of the House of Usher is a horror novel of gothic genre and is listed as one of the most distinguished short stories in the world. Its horrifying atmosphere, picturesque language, moving plot, image of death and degradation and even charm of horror itself all capture readers' hearts. At the same time, they also create a great challenge to translators. Translators have to think about the question of transmitting the horror to target readers. In order to reproduce the ideorealm of the source text and make the target readers' response similar to source-text readers', it is necessary to study its translation.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Edgar Allan Poe and his works influence literature in the United States and around the world. However, like many famous writers, Edgar Allan Poe has received not only praise, but criticism as well, especially when he was alive. As time goes by, his merit is gradually recognized. It is true of China. The translation of Edgar Allan Poe in China has gone through a long process of more than a century that consists of three phases:

The Chinese translation of Edgar Allan Poe began in 1905 and Zhou Zuoren is the first person who introduced his works to China. He translated *The Gold-Bug* and *Silence-A Fable* with classical Chinese. And in the preface

made by Lu Xun, he has a very high opinion of Poe. And in 1917, Zhou Shoujuan translated *The Tell-Tale Heart*, which has another version by Shen Yanbing and one year later Zhonghua Publishing House published a collection of his detective novels. Not only his novels but also his poems, such as *The Poetic Principle, The Raven* were put into Chinese at that time, although the number of translations is not large.

Since then, the number of the Chinese translation of his works has greatly increased. Poe's works were systematically introduced to China, which is more than 80 years later than France. In 1949, Jiao Juyin translated *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, which is the only long novel of Poe and also *Selected Tales of Poe*. There are more than 10 translation works by that time. But due to the social background at that moment, his works were regarded as being weird, negative and degenerate. Until the reform and opening-up, the research on Poe develops so quickly that it reaches the prosperity unprecedented in history. Many publishing houses published the Chinese translation of his works. In 1982 Foreign Literature Press published *Short Stories of Edgar Allan Poe* translated by Chen Liangting and Xu Ruchun and in 1995 Cao Minglun translated his poetry and tales that were printed by Joint Publishing.

And in the new century, Poe's works were retranslated by many translators, such as, Lei Ge (1998), Liu Xiangyu (1999), Wang Minhua (1999), Zhu Puxuan (2000), Xiong Rongbin (2000), Ma Ainong (2001), Liu Wanyong (2002) etc. , which reflect the growing interest of Chinese readers in Edgar Allan Poe (Cao, 2009).

2. THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

Edgar Allan Poe first published *The Fall of the House of Usher* in 1839, which is one of the best short stories in the world. The imaginative details and descriptions and the sheer popularity of the story have made it a literary classic.

The story goes that the narrator is invited by his friend, Roderick Usher, to come to his house, because Roderick suffers from an illness and needs his help. As he arrives, the narrator notes a thin crack extending from the roof, down the front of the building and into the lake. Roderick later tells the narrator that his sister, Madeline, is dead and he wants to place her body in the family tomb located in the house for two weeks before she is permanently buried. Along with the storm, Roderick becomes more and more hysterical, and finally screams that his sister was in fact alive when she was entombed. Suddenly, Madeline turns up at the door, which is blown open. She falls on her brother, and both land on the floor as corpses. The narrator then escapes from the house, and, as he looks back, he sees the moon shining through the suddenly widened crack of the house. As he watches, the House of Usher breaks in two and sinks into the lake.

Readers are deeply fascinated by its horrifying atmosphere, picturesque language, moving plot, image of death and degradation and even the charm of horror itself. No wonder, *The Fall of the House of Usher* is considered Poe's most famous work of prose. Actually, readers are attracted not only by its dark surroundings and terrifying ghostly symbols but also by Poe's unmatched style. This highly unsettling macabre work is recognized as a masterpiece of American gothic literature. As G. R. Thompson (1970) writes in his introduction to *Great Short Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, "the tale has long been hailed as a masterpiece of Gothic horror; it is also a masterpiece of dramatic irony and structural symbolism."

3. THE COMPARSION BETWEEN THE TWO CHINESE VERSIONS

The paper selects two Chinese versions of *The Fall of the House of Usher*: one is taken from *Short Stories by Edgar Allan Poe* published by People's Literature Publishing House, which was translated by XuRuchun (hereafter referred as version 1) and the other is Peng Guiju and Qin Xiubai's *Appreciations on Works of Edgar Allan Poe* published by Wuhan Technological University of Survey and Mapping Press (hereafter referred as version 2). And then the paper will make a comparative study of these two versions from three aspects: selection of translation method, selection of word meaning and reproduction of ideorealm in the source text.

3.1 Selection of Translation Method

Example 1: I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion. (Peng & Qin, 1999)

Version 1: 莫奈何, 只得自圆其说. (Poe, 1998)

Version 2: 我只得退而接受一个不令人满意的看法. (Peng & Qin, 1999)

"I was forced to fall back upon…" and "unsatisfactory conclusion" are translated into "莫奈何", "自圆其说" in version 1 and "只得退而接受", "不令人满意的看法" in version 2. Obviously, version 1 adopts free translation, while version 2 takes the literal translation method. Version 1 breaks the original sentence structure into two clauses, which is more fit for the syntax of Chinese. The word "forced" is translated into "莫奈何" that better expresses the narrator's helpless mood. Version 2 keeps the syntax and vocabulary of the source text, that is, adopts the translation method of word-to-word, but the translation sounds a little bit strange in Chinese. Considering the smoothness of the target text and target readers' response, version 1 is better.

Example 2: It was, especially, upon retiring to bed late in the high of the seventh or eighth day after the placing of the lady Madeline within the donjon, that I experienced the full power of such feelings. (Peng & Qin, 1999)

Version 1: 玛德琳小姐的遗体在主堡中停放了七八天, 有日深夜, 我躺在床上, 尤其体验到这种种情绪的折磨. (Poe, 1998)

Version 2: 尤其是在玛德莲小姐安放在地下室后的第七或第八个深夜里, 我躺在床上充分体验到了这种情绪的强烈影响. (Peng & Qin, 1999)

Apparent difference between the two versions can be seen in this example. There is only one sentence in the source text. Version 1 breaks it into four clauses and version 2 has only two clauses. It is known that long sentences in English are more, which are made possible by many modifiers while there are more short sentences in Chinese whose syntactical structure is looser than English. Therefore, when translating, we'd better break the long sentence into several short sentences in Chinese. Compared with version 2, version 1 is better suited to the expressional habit of Chinese. In addition, the phrase "late in the high of the seventh or eighth day" is put into "……七八天, 有日深夜" in version 1, whereas it is "第七或第八个深夜里" in version 2. This example also reflects the choice of different translation methods. Version 1 adopts free translation, while version 2 takes the literal translation method. Version 1 breaks the fetters of the sentence patterns of the source text, which separates the whole phrase into two clauses and uses "深夜" as adverbial clause of time, while version 2 keeps the original sentence pattern, leading to a very long attributive of "深夜". This kind of expression is not suitable in Chinese and carries the translationese that should be avoided in translation.

Example 3: There were times, indeed, when I thought his unceasingly agitated mind was laboring with an oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled for the necessary courage. (Peng & Qin, 1999)

Version 1: 说真的, 有时候, 我总以为他那始终折腾的心理苦苦想着什么紧锁的秘密, 少不得拼命鼓起勇气, 一吐为快. (Poe, 1998)

Version 2: 说真的, 有时我想到他永无安宁的心正与一个令他难受的秘密苦斗, 他在费力搜集揭示那秘密的勇气. (Peng & Qin, 1999)

Version 1 adopts free translation, which makes the sentence more smooth and understandable; conversely, version 2 just translates word to word, which is difficult to understand. Chinese readers may not understand why "心" can struggle with "秘密" or why "搜集" can be collocated with "勇气". There is no such expression in Chinese, so it fails to convey the sense of the source text.

From the above three examples, we can see that version 1 prefers free translation, while version 2 tends to use literal translation. Free and literal translation have always been the focus of argument among scholars both at home and abroad. Free translation is translation according to meaning and literal translation is the rendering of text from one language to another "word-for-word" rather than conveying the sense of the original. It seems impossible to decide which is better. And in what situations will we use literal translation or free translation? From the above three examples, it can be seen that version 2 is not in accordance

with the Chinese expression and has the translationese that hinders the understanding of target readers, which should be avoided in translation. So if literal translation cannot affect the understanding of the target readers, then it can be used. Otherwise, free translation method should be taken. Thus, in order to arouse similar response from target readers to source-text readers', it is better to take the translation method of free translation in the above three examples.

3.2 Selection of Word Meaning

Example 4: …but with a shudder even more thrilling than before… (Peng & Qin, 1999)

Version 1: ……竟比刚才还要惶悚. (Poe, 1998)

Version 2: ……比任何时候都要凄惶. (Peng & Qin, 1999)

In the example, "thrilling" is translated into two different words in the two versions: "惶悚"in version 1 and "凄惶" in version 2. According to *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (Lü, 2002), "惶悚" means "panic" that is usually used in formal contexts and "凄" is often connected with sadness. Let's have a look at the paragraph where the source text is. It is such a vivid description of the surroundings around the House of Usher before the narrator enters that it creates a terrifying atmosphere, which carries a foreshadowing of what is to follow later on in the story. Therefore, it is not suitable to use "凄惶" here. On comparison, the word used in version 1 is more proper.

Example 5: …I found myself crossing the old causeway. (Peng & Qin, 1999)

Version 1: 不知不觉穿过倾颓的堤道. (Poe, 1998)

Version 2: 我走过那古老的堤道. (Peng & Qin, 1999)

The word "crossing" is rendered into "穿过" in version 1, while it is "走过" in version 2. From the context, it can be seen that due to fear the narrator flees from the House of Usher at last. Think about his mentality of extreme horror at that time; is it possible for him to "walk" slowly? No wonder, version 2 does not consider the context of the word and chooses an unsuitable meaning of the word. Furthermore, the word "old" is rendered into different Chinese phrases. Compared with the word "古老" of version 2, version 1's "倾颓" better reflects the shabbiness of the House of Usher and then reproduces the charm of horror in the source text.

From the above two examples, we can see the difference of the two versions in the choice of the word meaning. According to Leech (1974), there are seven types of word meaning. Since a word has more than one meaning, how can translators decide the word meaning in the source text and then choose the proper equivalent in the target text? And what is the decisive factor in the choice of word meaning? About the choice of word meaning, Wang Zuoliang once stated that "a word has not only the direct meaning, surface meaning and meaning in the dictionary, but also the connotative, affective and associative meaning. And a sentence is not the simple combination of the meaning of words. Its structure, sounds, tone, rhythm, and speed all contribute to the production

of meaning." And "sometimes the meaning of a word or a sentence cannot be clarified by itself. It has to be confirmed in the whole paragraph or passage, that is, its reproduction in different contexts" (Wang, 1989). Peter Newmark has the similar opinion too, who suggests that translators should not translate isolated words because words are influenced by its linguistic, referential, cultural and personal context (Newmark, 2001). Nida also realizes the significance of context-"The real clues to meaning depend on contexts" (Nida, 2001). Thus, context is the essential factor in determining the word meaning. When translators choose the meaning, they should not only think about the meaning listed in the dictionary, but also the context.

3.3 Reproduction of Ideorealm in the Source Text

Example 6: During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of this year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens… (Peng & Qin, 1999)

Version 1: 那年秋天，有个阴郁、晦暗、岑寂的日子, 暝云低压压地笼罩着大地……(Poe, 1998)

Version 2: 那年秋天一个阴郁、晦暗而冥寂的日子, 云低天暗……(Peng & Qin, 1999)

The word "cloud" in the source text is translated into "暝云" in version 1, in which the translator adopts the translation method of amplification and adds one word "暝". In Chinese, this word means "dusk" that suggests the darkness. Thus, compared with version 2, version 1 reproduces the dark and ghostly atmosphere in the source text. Moreover, the usage of "低压压地", "笼罩" adds the repressiveness to the translation.

Example 7: The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely-discernible fissure… (Peng & Qin, 1999)

Version 1: 原来是恹恹西沉的一轮血红的月亮, 月光透过裂缝, 照得亮晃晃. (Poe, 1998)

Version 2: 原来是月光, 圆圆的, 血红的, 正要西沉的月亮正亮晃晃地透过那道裂缝照过来. (Peng & Qin, 1999)

Version 1 renders "setting" into "恹恹西沉". As what is explained in *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (Lü, 2002), "恹恹" is used to describe people's state of being sick and mentally fatigued. In this way, the translator personifies the moon and also implies the morbidity of the brother and sister in the House of Usher. Thus, the abnormal atmosphere in the House is successfully reproduced. By comparison with version 1, the words of "圆圆的", "正要西沉的" in version 2 cannot arouse the target readers' response similar to source-text readers'. On the contrary, "圆圆的" is usually associated with the full moon on mid-autumn day that gives people a nice feeling and cannot reflect the ideorealm of the source text.

From the above two examples, it can be seen that version 1 does better in the reproduction of ideorealm than version 2. The reproduction of ideorealm is a significant factor that translators must take into account when translating literary works. Mao Dun points out that literary works are the art created by language. And what we require from it is not only the concept of things and

the narration of the plot, but also the ideorealm that can attract readers, that is, through the artistic image, readers can have great emotion towards the thought and actions of characters in it (Sun, 2001).Good translation always truly reflects the ideorealm of the source text, making characters and true, living scenes display themselves vividly before the target readers. All in all, grasping the ideorealm of the source text and truly reproducing it are the essence of translation art (Zhang, 1987).

CONCLUSION

From the above comparison of the two Chinese versions of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, version 1 is superior to version 2 in the following aspects: selection of translation method, selection of word meaning and reproduction of ideorealm in the source text. This is because the translator of version 1 knows that when literal translation cannot fully express the source text, free translation should be adopted and he can also determine the word meaning according to the context. And the most important is that he grasps the ideorealm of the source text and fully reproduces it. All these have reference significance for the literary translation henceforth.

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