

## **On The Coexistence And Complementarity Of Chinese Translation Methods Of English Metrical Poetry**

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### **Abstract**

The Chinese translation of English metrical poetry has a history of more than one hundred years, but it is still controversial on how to translate English metrical poetry into Chinese. Chinese translators have hitherto devised three methods to render English metrical poetry: sinolization, liberalization, and poetic form transplantation. Translators practicing the methods of sinolization and liberalization belong to the group in favor of spiritual resemblance. Translators who follow the method of poetic form transplantation belong to the group in favor of formal resemblance. It is quite obvious that the two groups have disagreement on the translation standard or guiding principle. Actually the translation standards of the two groups can coexist, and the translation methods under the guidance of these different translation standards can coexist and complement each other. It is impractical and impossible to use one Chinese translation method or standard to guide all the Chinese translation practice, and the diverse Chinese translation methods of English metrical poetry can coexist and complement each other in the foreseeable future.

**Keywords:** English metrical poetry, Chinese translation, translation method, coexistence, complementarity.

## **Introduction**

The Chinese introduction of English metrical poetry dates back to Qing Dynasty (1644-1908), but poetry translators still hold conflicting opinions about the Chinese translation method, and their attitude towards other translation methods is usually negative. Some translators even claim that earlier methods are becoming “outdated” and will be replaced by later ones, just as what happens in the biological evolution (Huang, 2001). However, Chinese renditions adopting different methods, including the so-called outdated ones, are equally popular with the readers, and some translators still prefer the “outdated” methods to render English metrical poetry.

## **Disagreement on poetry translation standard**

It is not easy to handle the paradox between form and spirit satisfactorily. The Chinese translators of English metrical poetry fall into two groups: one gives priority to spiritual resemblance, and the other gives priority to formal resemblance.

Not a few metrical poetry translators (Cheng, 1923; Wang, 1962; Feng, 1978; Liu, 1996; Chan, 2003) put their major emphasis on conveying the original poem’s spirit instead of the form. According to them, the essence of poetry translation is the transference of spirit instead of form. Whether the translation resembles the original depends on conveying the spirit, not on transferring the form, and the first thing that must be preserved in the translation is the spirit and meaning. For the sake of the spirit, some sacrifice of the form is inevitable and justifiable. A translation is only an approximation to the original poem, and the first and foremost concern of a translator is spiritual resemblance.

Other poem translators (Bian et al., 1959; Huang, 1999; Jiang & Xu, 1996) think that formal resemblance is the prerequisite for spiritual resemblance, formal resemblance precedes spiritual resemblance and spiritual resemblance can be achieved only by formal resemblance, and there has never been a successful poetry translation that ignores formal resemblance. Huang Gaoxin (1999, p.191) even proposes a quantitative system to evaluate the quality of metrical poetry translation. The poetry translators of this group try to transplant the formal features of the original to the Chinese version

It is exactly such disagreement on the guiding principle of poetry translation that leads to different Chinese translation methods of English metrical poetry.

## Chinese translation methods of English metrical poetry

Generally speaking, there are three Chinese translation methods of English metrical poetry: sinolization, liberalization and poetic form transplantation.

### Sinolization

Sinolization refers to the practice of translating English metrical verse into Chinese traditional poetic forms, such as *wuyan*, *qiyan*, *ciqu*. This is the method adopted by the first Chinese metrical poetry translators. At the very beginning of introducing English metrical poems into China, it was natural to render them into Chinese traditional poetic forms, because at that time they were indisputably the carrier of Chinese poetry.

The earliest Chinese translation of *A Psalm of Life* by H. W. Longfellow, the first English metrical poem translated into Chinese, took the form of *qiyanti*, a Chinese classic poetic form (Qian, 1982, p.173-194). The translation of the first stanza is as follows:

莫将烦恼著诗篇  
百岁原如一觉眠  
梦短梦长同是梦  
独留真气满坤乾

(Tr. by Dong Xun, qtd. Qian, 1982, p.190)

Dong Xun (1807-1892), was a high official of Qing Dynasty, and his Chinese version was based on the literal translation by Thomas Francis Wade, the British envoy to China. But their cooperation was more a diplomatic activity than a serious translation practice, for they were both officials.

The first translator who paid serious attention to the Chinese translation of English metrical poetry was Yan Fu (Huang, 2001). Yan Fu's translation of Thomas Huxley's long essay "Evolution and Ethics", which was issued in 1897 in book form under the title *Tianyan Lun* (On Evolution) was a milestone in Chinese translation history because Yan Fu laid down in his preface the three desiderata for translation that have been quoted ever since, namely *xin* (faithfulness), *da* (communicability) and *ya* (elegance). There are some metrical poems in *Evolution and Ethics*, which Yan Fu rendered into Chinese in classic Chinese poetic forms. Let's see Yan's translation of some lines from *An Essay on Man* by Alexander Pope:

All nature is but art, unknown to thee;  
All Chance, direction, which thou canst not see;  
All discord, harmony not understood;  
All partial evil, universal good;

元宰有秘机，斯人特未悟；  
世事岂偶然，彼苍审措注。  
乍疑乐律乖，庸知各得所？  
虽有偏沲灾，终则其利浦  
(Yan, 1905, p.35)

Yan's translation, in a Chinese classic poetic form of *wuyan*, was so refined and elegant that it was very popular among the Chinese literati, even those who were hostile to western culture at that time.

As time goes on, this method meets with various oppositions. Lao Long (1980, p.214-223) claims that English metrical poems have different styles and forms, some elegant, some primitively simple, and some plain and colloquial, so it is somewhat arbitrary to translate all in Chinese classical poetic forms. Yuan Kejia (1995) is doubtful about the feasibility of translating English metrical poems into Chinese classical ones, believing that by doing so, "the original poem's beauty would be spoiled." Jiang & Xu (1996, p.377-388) contends that "If all foreign poems were rendered into Chinese classical poems, how could Chinese-only readers get to know the features of Shakespeare's sonnet, Mayakovsky's staircase verse, etc? [...] and the development of Chinese new poetry would have been postponed". Huang Gaoxin (1999, p.191) argues that Chinese traditional poetic forms, either *siyan*, *wuyan* or *qiyan*, etc, are too condensed in form to reproduce the colloquial but structurally complicated language of English metrical poetry, and that the Chinese traditional poetic forms can not accommodate the diverse contents of English metrical poetry. The poetic lines of Chinese traditional or classical poetry are stipulated and generally quite short, translators may have to distort the content of the original in their rendition, and that the language expressions used in Chinese classical poetic forms are too archaic to be easily accessed by ordinary readers.

Pros for the method are not a few. The first is that Chinese traditional poetic forms have been deeply ingrained in most Chinese people, and are thus more popular than other poetic forms. Wang Baotong (1995), after examining more than one thousand Chinese poems of all kinds, including Chinese translations of foreign poems, finds that Chinese classical poetic forms are the favorite forms of Chinese readers, and English metrical poetry translations taking Chinese traditional poetic forms remain popular among many readers. Secondly, the fact that translations in the form of Chinese classical poetry are more catchy and readable further strengthens the translators' preference for the method. Feng Huazhan (1978, p.111-121) insists that a poem "should be written in a way that it lends itself to reading aloud and easy for memorization". There are two categories of poetry, one to be read by the eye, the other to be read by the mouth, the latter being "superior" to the former. For the sake of easy reading aloud, memorization and

circulation, translating English metrical verse into Chinese classical poetry forms is plausible.

### **Liberalization**

After the very first case of Chinese translation of *A Psalm of Life*, the sinolization method dominated the stage of Chinese translation of English metrical verse for half a century. With the *pai-hua* Chinese replacing the classical one as the literary language, some translators began to practice translating English metrical poetry in *pai-hua* (vernacular) Chinese. Since no rules for the versification of *pai-hua* Chinese had been established, and under the influence of western free-verse and semi-free verse, the liberalization went on the stage of poetry translation.

### **Translating English metrical poetry into Chinese prose**

There are not many translators who put English metrical poetry into prose Chinese, for the translation of poetry into prose, which is only semantically accurate, is not itself a poem and misses the point and soul of poetry (Turner, 1976, p.10). But there are some Chinese translators who achieved great success in translating English metrical poetry into prose Chinese. Zhu Shenghao's prose Chinese translation of 31 plays by Shakespeare, and Fang Chong's prose Chinese translation of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* have become classic Chinese translations.

Though the majority of translators are not in favor of the method, some are strong advocates of it. They argue that translation is not facsimile and the resemblance to the original lies in the spirit instead of the form, and those rhyming and line divisions in the translation are not important. And if poetry translators do not free themselves, their Chinese renditions will be too rigid to keep the flavor of the original. The formal elements of English metrical poetry, like rhythm, rhyme, etc, are quite distinct from those of Chinese poetry, and it is futile to try to relive these elements in Chinese (Weng, 1985; Liu, 1996, p.358-371).

Its strength is also its defect—prosaic style makes it impossible for readers to realize what they are reading is originally a poem. This method is suitable for such content-centered poetry as epic and poetic drama. The existence of prosaic Chinese translations of Homer's epic, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, and Shakespeare's poetic drama proves the justifiability of translating English metrical poetry into prose Chinese.

### **Translating English metrical poetry into Chinese free or semi-free verse**

Since, compared to Chinese classical poetry, *pai-hua* Chinese poetry or new poetry has a short history of less than one hundred years, Chinese poets have not reached an

agreement on what should be the rhythmic unit of *pai-hua* Chinese poetry. Some poets as well as poetry translators think that the rhythmic unit of new poetry should be Chinese character, while the others are in favor of *dun* (Bian, 1959, p.99-106). Comparatively speaking, the latter enjoys more popularity and influence. This divergence has brought about different translation approaches in translators favoring poetic form transplantation, which we will discuss later.

Since poetry translators could not find in Chinese language ready equivalent of foot, which is the rhythmic unit of English metrical poetry, new concepts *yinchi* (sound ruler), *yinzu* (sound group) and *dun* (pause) were put forward respectively by Wen Yiduo in 1920s, Sun Dayu in 1930s, and He Qifang in 1950s. The three concepts roughly refer to the same. Currently, the term *dun* is frequently used to address the rhythmic unit of *pai-hua* Chinese poetry. A *dun* is a semantic and phonological unit which usually consists of two or three Chinese characters. As a kind of semantic unit, *dun* also takes account of the phonological feature of *pai-hua* Chinese, i.e. the dominance of two-or three-character Chinese words. The following stanza from a Chinese poem by Wen Yiduo consists of lines with the same number of *dun* ( “|” marks the separation between *dun*):

这是 | 一沟 | 绝望的 | 死水，  
清风 | 吹不起 | 半点 | 漪沦。  
不如 | 多扔些 | 破铜 | 烂铁，  
爽性 | 泼你的 | 剩菜 | 残羹  
(Wen, 2005, p.85)

Free verse and semi-free verse, as their names suggest, are more flexible and less restricted. Different from Chinese classical poetry, Chinese free verse and semi-free verse are written in *pai-hua* Chinese, and their rhythmic patterns are not regular, whether from the perspective of Chinese character or *dun*. The difference between free and semi-free verse is that the latter is partly rhymed and parallel in structure while the former is not.

Similar to supporters for the method of sinolization, the advocates of rendering English metrical poetry into *pai-hua* Chinese free verse or semi-free verse do not consider the formal elements of the original English metrical poetry inviolable either. What they are much concerned about is the transfer of the spirit of the original. They believe that, without the restriction of formal elements, greater accuracy in semantic content and spirit can be achieved.

The difference between translators favoring this approach and those favoring translating English metrical verse into prose is that the former think that poetry should be translated into poetry instead of another literary genre. Guo Moruo (as cited in Guo, 1999, p.59) speaks of this point, “Chinese translations of foreign poetry must be like poetry. [...]

Poetry is composed of certain poetic elements such as style and versification. If all these are completely eliminated, such renditions would be tasteless and not poetic at all”.

### Poetic form transplantation

It refers to translating by imitating the versification of the original English metrical poem. When transplanting the poetic forms, a translator replaces English syllable with Chinese character, replaces English foot with Chinese *dun*, or replaces both English syllable and foot with Chinese character and *dun*.

### Replacing English syllable with Chinese character

We have in the above mentioned that there are two different views about the rhythmic unit of *pai-hua* Chinese poetry, one taking Chinese character as the rhythmic unit, the other taking *dun* as the rhythmic unit. Translators who take Chinese character as the rhythmic unit of *pai-hua* Chinese poetry replace English syllables with Chinese characters when translating English metric poetry. In their eyes, Chinese character is the equivalent of English syllable in poetry translation. In poetry translation, translators following this approach use the same or approximately the same number of Chinese characters to replace the syllables of the original in every line. As to the rhyme, they try to imitate that of the original although they sometimes make minor alterations. Take Dai Liuling’s translation of the first four lines of Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 18* as an example:

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?	a
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:	b
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,	a
And summer’s lease hath all too short a date:	b
我怎样能把您比做夏天?	a
您比她更可爱也更温和:	b
五月的娇蕾有暴风震颠,	a
夏季的寿命很短就渡过:	b

(Chen, 1999, p.106)

Each line of the original has five iambic feet and ten syllables, and the poem’s rhyme scheme being *abab*. In Dai’s translation, every poetic line consists of ten Chinese characters, the ratio of syllables to Chinese characters per line being 1:1; and the rhyming is also *abab*. Reading such a translation which has neat form and identical number of Chinese characters in each line, readers can easily and safely infer that the original is a regulated poem.

### Replacing English foot with Chinese *dun*

Translators taking *dun* as the rhythmic unit of *pai-hua* Chinese poetry advocate replacing English foot with Chinese *dun*; the number of *dun* per line should be the same as the

number of foot in the original. To the number of Chinese characters per line they, however, do not pay much heed; the number of Chinese characters may not be exactly the same as that of the original syllables. As to the rhyming, they hold the same idea as those favoring replacing syllable with Chinese character. Bian Zhilin's translation of the first stanza of *The Isles of Greece* can illustrate the characteristics of the method of replacing English foot with Chinese *dun*:

The isles of Greece! The isles of Greece!	a
Where burning Sappho loved and sung.	b
Where grew the arts of war and peace,	a
Where Delos rose, and Phoebus sprung!	b
Eternal summer gilds them yet,	c
But all, except their sun, is set.	c

希腊   群岛啊,   希腊   群岛!	a
从前有   火热的   萨福   唱情歌,	b
从前长   文治   武功的   花草,	a
涌出过   德罗斯,   跳出过   阿普罗!	b
夏天来   镀金,   还长久   灿烂——	c
除了   太阳,   什么都   落了山!	C

(Bian, 1996, p.105)

Bian uses four *dun* to replace the four iambic feet, and the rhyme pattern of the Chinese version is the same as that of the original, which is *ababcc*. Compared to translations replacing English syllable with Chinese character, this kind of translation is not so neat in appearance, the number of Chinese characters in each line not being the same.

### Replacing both English syllable and foot with Chinese character and *dun*

This method was first devised by Huang Gaoxin in 1980s. Although he advocates *dun* being the rhythmic unit in Chinese, he thinks that translators should also pay attention to the number of Chinese characters, since the syllable number in the original is rather neat. Aware that translations using “replacing syllable with Chinese character” is well-arranged in appearance and translations adopting “replacing foot with *dun*” is neat in sound, after arduous exploration and much translation practice, he put forward the method of “replacing both syllable and foot with Chinese character and *dun*, and reproducing the original rhyming.” The requirement for translators using this method is indeed comparatively more demanding. The method is illustrated with the example below:

I Strove with None	
I strove with none, for none was worth my strife;	a
Nature I loved, and, next to Nature, art;	b
I warmed both hands before the fire of life;	a
It sinks, and I am ready to depart.	b



This iambic pentameter quatrain was written by Walter Savage Landor.

我与世   无争,   因为我   不屑   与谁争;	a
大自然   我热爱,   自然   之后   数艺术。	b
生活的   火上,   我把手   烘得   热腾腾;	a
火现在   快熄灭,   我已   准备好   离去。	b

(Huang, 2007, p.84)

Huang's rendition has five *dun* per line, which exactly reflects the foot number of the original poem; and the rhyming is also reproduced. He, however, has made some alteration to the number of Chinese characters in the *dun*. In the rendition, every line has twelve Chinese characters, the ratio of syllable number to Chinese character number being expanded to 1:1.2. Such minor expansion of the number of Chinese characters for each line, in Huang's words, can provide translators a little freedom, and thus is tolerable (Huang, 2007, p.84-85).

Although the method of poetic form transplantation has achieved some success in reproducing the formal elements of the original, it still faces considerable opposition. Since English is a stress language, and Chinese is a tone language, *dun* and foot are not equivalent, and the musical effects they produce are obviously different (Feng, 1981, p.247-250; Weng, 1983, p.137). The rhythmic unit of English poetry, foot, has equal time-interval and contains regular combination of stressed and unstressed syllables, so it is impossible to be transplanted into Chinese language, in the same way as the rhythmic unit of Chinese classical poetry, i.e. *pingze* (level and oblique tones) can not be transferred to English poetry (Lao, 1995). "Chinese poetry and English poetry are so different from each other that any attempts at imitating the form can not produce the same effect produced by the original" (Zhao, 2003, p.209).

### **The complementarity of Chinese translation methods of English metrical poetry**

We have examined different Chinese translation methods of English metrical poetry in Section 3, and found that the reason for the divergence is that different translators favoring different methods have different translation norms, and they have conflicting understanding about the relationship between form and spirit. Translators supporting the methods of sinolization and liberalization prefer spiritual resemblance to formal resemblance, or rather, their translation norm is spiritual resemblance, and translators favoring poetic form transplantation uphold the opposite opinion. Each side wants to establish their translation standard as legitimate and authoritative, and dispel the translation standard held by the other. Actually, we have sound reasons to propose the coexistence and complementarity of different translation methods.

### **Multiple functions of poetry**

Generally speaking, poetry has five major functions: pure aesthetic function, recreational function, didactic function, cognitive function, and utilitarian function (Gu, 2003, p.68). Pure aesthetic function refers to the arousal of the reader's sense of beauty by such formal elements in poetry as language skills, meter, style, rhetoric, etc. Recreational function refers to the delight poetry brings to readers. Besides formal elements, such things also include theme, ideological content, emotional impact, etc. Didactic function emphasizes the moralizing role of some poems, such as the mediaeval catholic poetry. Poetry can help readers acquire knowledge, verities, etc, and promote their cognitive development; this is the so-called cognitive function of poetry. For example, *Faust*, a poetic drama written by Goethe, is a rather philosophical work. Utilitarian function, as the name suggests, is concerned with the practical function of poetry. For instance, some health care tips are written in the form of poetry, which facilitates people's memorization.

English metrical poetry, a subset of poetry, also has these functions. Specifically, one poem may have only one or two functions; another poem may have more or even all the five functions. Different translators may want to highlight different functions while translating, which unquestionably decides there should be more than one Chinese translation method. For an English metrical verse, some translators may want to distinguish its aesthetic value, some its didactic function, and some its utilitarian function.

Take *The Isles of Greece* as an example. Hu Shi, one of the pioneers of Chinese *pai-hua* poetry, translated it in the form of *lisaoti*. The reason, we think, is that he wanted to emphasize the didactic and utilitarian function of the poem. The style *lisaoti* expresses emotions openly and directly. Hu Shi's rendition taking the form of *lisaoti* is in concord with the inherent rhythms of Chinese language, and thus facilitates people's memorization and chanting. Such a rendition can better arouse Chinese people's patriotism and opposition to foreign invaders. A translator who values the cognitive function may transplant the original poetic form to introduce some knowledge about English metrical verse to Chinese readers.

### **Diversity of human aesthetic values**

From the angle of human aesthetic values, we also have rational justification for the coexistence and complementarity of different Chinese translation methods of English metrical verse. Undoubtedly, diverse aesthetic values lead to different translation styles. Conversely, it can be said that the coexistence of different translators and translation styles has great influence on human aesthetic interests, making them more varied. Diversity entails richness, and implies that we should adopt a more accommodating

attitude towards different ways of translating. A poem may have several or even tens of renditions, each with its own merits. An English metrical poem can be translated into Chinese in the form of classical poetry, free verse, semi-free verse, or *pai-hua* Chinese metrical verse. Each of them has its own charms, and one style of translation can not satisfy all the translators and readers. Translations are produced and read not just for didactic, cognitive purposes, but also for entertainment, and the more styles of entertainment there are, the better.

It is partly correct to say that aesthetically people tend to love novelty, because they are also nostalgic. These two inclinations blend to constitute the basic characteristics of human aesthetic psychology (Gu, 1990, p.26). This is the essential reason why people's aesthetic interests are this diverse. Again with reference to poetry translation, if *pai-hua* Chinese poetry is good, are poetry in classical forms necessarily bad? While free verse should be encouraged, should regulated verse be suppressed? The most crucial point, we think, is the perspective from which one views the whole thing.

#### **Advantages of multiple complementary versions**

Lefevere (1975, p.99) suggests that almost all poetry translations concentrate on some aspects of the original poem, rather than on the original as a whole. The coexistence of multiple versions would give readers diverse opportunities to approach the original from different aspects. While talking about the introduction of foreign poetry to readers who do not know the source language, Elizabeth Trahan (1988) is not in favor of providing the so-called best translation, rather, she advocates the supply of "a number of complementary versions" which each approaches the original from a different angle; and on the basis of these versions, the partial views readers gained will "fuse into an experience of the poem as a whole". Rainer Schulte (1988) expresses similar idea, "hardly any one single translation does justice to the original poem. [...] Here the concept of multiple translations becomes an invaluable tool to increase the reader's comprehension of a given poem"; and he thinks, "The actual poem, its possible meaning, and aesthetic dimension, resides somewhere between the solutions offered by each individual translator".

Since there exist many differences between English language and Chinese language in such respects as linguistic structure, cultural background, mode of thinking and ways of expression, the translatability of poetry cannot but be relative. In the process of poetry translation, there must be "losses in varying degrees ranging from linguistic style, artistic feature to concrete mode of expression" (Sun, 2001, p.345). When exposed to multiple complementary versions, which presuppose multiple complementary translation methods, readers will approximate the original more closely. This is the reason why we are supportive of the coexistence and complementarity of multiple Chinese translation

methods of English metrical poetry. Whichever translation method it is, it is anchored to the same original poem. The following diagram shows the relationship between the original poem and its different renditions:

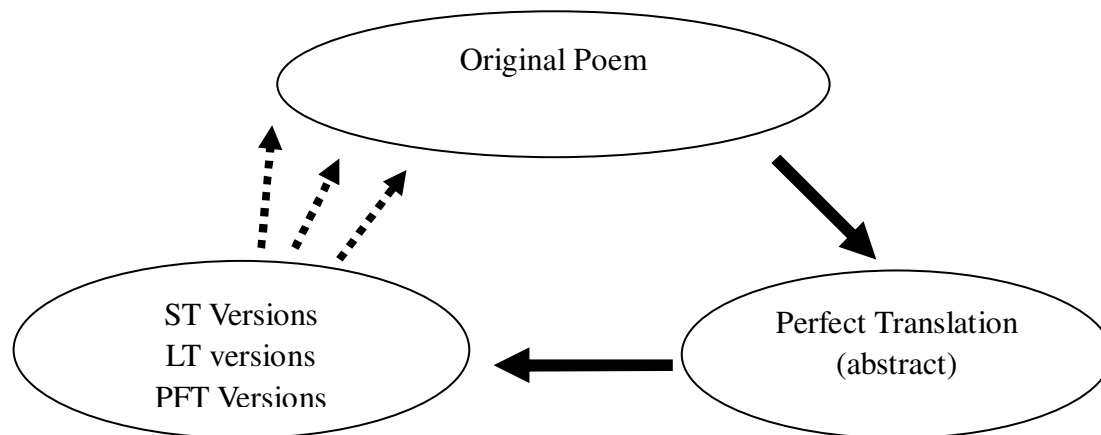


Figure 1: ST stands for sinolization translation, LT for liberalization translation, and PFT for poetic form transplantation

James Liu (1974, p.20) compares reading a translated poem to “looking at a beautiful woman through a veil,” the thickness of which is decided by the skill and consideration of the translator; and he further contends that no translator “possess the magic power of lifting the veil” and what they can do is to provide the best rendition that they can. In that case, why don’t we provide the best translations of more translators to reduce the thickness of veil?

## Conclusion

The poetry translators who are in favor of formal resemblance think that form and spirit are indivisible, and in their translation practice they give priority to formal resemblance, taking form as the prerequisite for the spirit. On the contrary, those who put special emphasis on spiritual resemblance contend that the genius of poetry translation is reproducing the spirit rather than the form. It is exactly such divergence on translation standard or guiding principle that leads to different translation methods. The multiplicity of poetry’s functions and diversity of human aesthetic interests decide there should be more than one single translation style or translation method. No single translation can reach the closest approximation in all respects to the original. Existence of multiple complementary renditions can better help readers get a relatively more comprehensive view of the original. Accordingly, the coexistence and complementarity of diverse translation methods is theoretically justifiable.

Through our study, we find that although the three major translation methods of English metrical verse, i.e. sinolization, liberalization, and poetic form transplantation, came out in a chronological order, the later ones have not replaced and can not replace the earlier ones. At the present time, the three methods coexist and complement each other, and they are like three parallel roads, none of which can replace the others in the foreseeable future.

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