

A Research on the English Translation of Ethnic Literature from the Perspective of “Three Beauties Theory”: A Case Study of Sheba Songs of the Tujia Ethnic Group

Xinya Gong, Zhiqin Wang *

School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, Nanchong 637001, China

Abstract

The translation of Chinese ethnic literature is a crucial initiative to promote Chinese culture to the world. As a traditional folk song of the Tujia ethnic group, Sheba Songs is rich in connotations and embodies the beauty of artistic conception; it has a strong sense of rhythm, representing the beauty of sound; and it features neat parallelism, demonstrating the beauty of form. Guided by Xu Yuanchong’s “Three Beauties Theory” as the theoretical framework, this study explores the beauty in sense, sound, and form in the English translation of the Tujia Sheba Songs. It highlights the applicability of the “Three Beauties Theory” in the translation of ethnic literature and holds significant reference value and practical guiding significance for the English translation of Chinese ethnic literature.

Keywords

Three Beauties Theory; Ethnic Literature; Tujia ethnic group; Sheba Songs; English Translation.

1. Introduction

Interpreting

As a multi-ethnic nation, China has given birth to diverse ethnic cultures, which occupy an important position in the world's ethnic literature. Since the 1990s, with the enhancement of China's comprehensive national power, international academic interest in the English translation of Chinese ethnic literature has grown. The Australian scholar David Holm translated *The Brigands' Song*, which originated from the antiphonal singing of the Zhuang people, depicting the fate of young Zhuang men enlisted in the army under the chieftain system^[1]. American scholar Mark Bender, based on the characteristics of Chinese ethnic oral literature, proposed a cosmographic translation perspective and published his translation *The Borderlands of Asia: Culture, Place, Poetry*^[2]. Huang Xin argues that current Chinese ethnic literature faces challenges such as a limited number of translations and issues with translation quality, and suggests solutions in terms of translator training, translation principles, and dissemination methods^[3].

Sheba Songs is a singing repertoire performed during the traditional Tujia Hand-Waving Dance. It has been included in the Hunan Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Its themes encompass four parts: the origin of humanity, ethnic migration, agricultural labor, and heroic stories. *Sheba Songs* is rich in Tujia culture, distinct in rhythm, and neat in form, which presents certain challenges for its translation while also making it a representative case for verifying the applicability of Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties Theory" to the translation of ethnic literature. The research team led by Zhang Liyu, supported by a National Social Science Fund project, used the 1989 edition of *Sheba Songs* published by Yuelu Press as the source text. After four years, they completed the first trilingual (Tujia, Chinese, English) version, which was published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in 2018. This translation achieves the linguistic

transfer from Tujia to English and faithfully conveys the original text in terms of cultural connotation, rhythmic effect, and structural form, offering significant reference value and practical guidance for the study of ethnic literary translation into English.

2. Correspondence between the English Translation of *Sheba Songs* and the "Three Beauties Theory"

Lu Xun described the "three beauties" in his Outline of *Chinese Literary History* as follows: "Beauty in sense moves the heart, that is the first; beauty in sound pleases the ear, that is the second; beauty in form delights the eye, that is the third."^[4] Xu Yuanchong applied these "three beauties" to the field of translation, formulating the "Three Beauties Theory." He proposed that the standard for literary translation should prioritize beauty in sense, followed by beauty in sound, and then beauty in form, striving for the unity of all three^[5].

The "Three Beauties Theory" is widely applied in the field of literary translation, especially poetry translation. As an important component of literature, the practice of translating ethnic literature is also suitable, under certain conditions, for guidance by the "Three Beauties Theory." Current challenges in translating ethnic literature include deviations in conveying the original thought. The requirement of "beauty in sense" for fidelity to the original can precisely address this issue. Furthermore, the combined presentation of "beauty in sound" and "beauty in form" can better ensure the transmission of cultural connotations and expand the translation space for ethnic literature^[6]. In summary, the "Three Beauties Theory" is not only applicable to poetry translation but can also provide theoretical guidance for the translation of ethnic literature.

Sheba Songs aligns closely with the "Three Beauties Theory" in content, language, and form. In terms of content, *Sheba Songs* records the historical evolution and ancestral working life of ancient Tujia society from aspects such as ancient history, geographical environment, religious beliefs, folklore and language, and agricultural development, covering the early history and social features of the Tujia people. Linguistically, *Sheba Songs* consists mainly of sung lyrics, possessing a complete structure. It includes both creation and heroic epics, as well as short songs reflecting folk customs and productive activities. It is rhythmic, free, and lively. In form, *Sheba Songs* employs rhetorical devices such as parallelism, metaphor, personification, and antithesis, endowing images with vivid expressiveness and enhancing the folk song's artistic appeal. Therefore, guided by Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties Theory," this paper analyzes the English translation of the Tujia *Sheba Songs* from the three levels of beauty in sense, sound, and form. It aims to provide a methodological reference for the globalization of ethnic literature and contribute to the international dissemination of ethnic culture.

3. Beauty in Sense in the English Translation of *Sheba Songs*

"Beauty in sense" means that the translation must faithfully convey the emotion and cultural connotation of the original. The English translation of *Sheba Songs* underwent a triple linguistic transformation: Tujia - Chinese - English. During this process, differences in thought patterns, cultural backgrounds, and social customs among the three languages can emerge. Therefore, when translating *Sheba Songs*, the translator needs to fully consider the cultural background of foreign readers, endeavoring to convey the spiritual core of the original and achieve the goal of "beauty in sense" through the beauty of artistic conception and cultural beauty.

3.1. Beauty of Artistic Conception

Artistic conception originates from the aesthetic perception of scene and emotion merging, an artistic realm created by the integration of subjective feelings and objective scenery. Ideal translation of artistic conception evokes readers' associations and achieves emotional

resonance^[7]. Specifically, artistic conception conveys emotion, allowing readers to grasp the work's mood, resonate deeply with the author, and deepen their understanding of the piece. The limited words of *Sheba Songs* contain rich meanings, and differences in cultural backgrounds between Chinese and Western readers may lead to divergences in understanding its cultural connotations.

ST1: 你一下看看啰,

那个小谷穗子哩!

牛缆索一样哩!

那个包谷坨坨哩!

水牛角一样哩!

稻子穗穗哩!

尾巴一样哩! [8]

TT1: Just take a look.

Earheads of millet

Are as thick as bridles;

Cobs of corns

Are as big as buffaloes' horns;

Spikes of rice

Are as long as horses' tails.[8]

Analysis: This passage comes from Chapter 2, "Praying for a Bumper Harvest," in Part 1, "Song of the Origin of Humanity," of *Sheba Songs*. It depicts the Tujia people's simple wish for thriving crops and a bountiful harvest in the coming year. In Chinese culture, autumn is the harvest season, and words like "rice ears" and "grain" are often used to create the artistic conception of "harvest." For instance, literary works such as *The Biggest Ear of Wheat and Golden Sheaves of Rice* depict autumn harvest scenes. In the original text of *Sheba Songs*, "牛缆索", "水牛角", and "尾巴" are used as metaphors for "谷穗", "包谷", and "稻穗", respectively. However, in foreign cultures, these terms do not inherently carry the imagery of "autumn harvest," preventing foreign readers from grasping the metaphorical depiction of a bountiful scene. Therefore, to bridge this cultural gap, the translator employed the translation technique of addition. By adding "thick," "big," and "long," the translation conveys the imagery of an abundant autumn harvest more vividly.

ST2: 天地伊始^[8]

TT2: Origins of Heaven and Earth^[8]

Analysis: This phrase comes from Chapter 4, "Origins of Heaven and Earth," in Part 1, "Song of the Origin of Humanity," of *Sheba Songs*. The Tujia people believe that all things possess spirits, and heaven and earth embody divine will. "天" is a natural space that envelops mountains and nourishes life. In Western culture, "God" and "Lord" carry strong religious connotations. According to the Bible, "God" created heaven and earth, establishing the role of a personal creator. "Lord" is often used as a respectful title for "God," frequently appearing in Christian scriptures and liturgies. Directly translating the Tujia "天" as "God" or "Lord" would impose the Western concept of a personalized God onto Tujia culture, leading to misunderstanding. In contrast, "Heaven" is more suitable for this artistic conception, as it can reflect the natural quality of "天" while also encompassing its implied divine will, avoiding cultural misinterpretation and faithfully conveying the connotation of "天" in Tujia culture.

3.2. Cultural Beauty

Cultural exchange between different ethnic groups is often asymmetrical. The translator, acting as a kind of "negotiator" in cross-cultural communication, is inevitably influenced by their own culture, making it difficult to maintain absolute neutrality in translation^[9]. The ethnic culture embedded in ethnic classics is unique. Translators must deeply analyze the cultural connotations of the work, interpreting it within its specific context and flexibly adjusting translation strategies to achieve effective cross-cultural dissemination.

ST3: 张古老^[8]

TT3: Zhanggulao

*Zhanggulao is the name of the immortal who created the Heaven.^[8]

Analysis: This term appears in Chapter 5, "Recreating Heaven and Earth," in Part 1, "Song of the Origin of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity," of *Sheba Songs*. In Tujia culture, "张古老" and "李古老" are responsible for creating heaven and earth, respectively. Zhanggulao is diligent and conscientious, making heaven vast and smooth, while Ligulao is lazy and careless, making the earth uneven. Both are mythical figures in Tujia culture, with no direct equivalents in English cultural contexts. Simple literal or phonetic translation would fail to convey the symbolic meaning of these Tujia mythological figures. Therefore, the translator used a transliteration-plus-annotation method. This preserves the original term's distinctiveness while supplementing background information, preventing misunderstandings of Tujia culture by foreign readers.

ST4: 匠帅拔佩^[8]

TT4: the Great General^[8]

Analysis: This term appears in Chapter 3, "The Great General," in Part 5, "Song of Heroic Stories," of *Sheba Songs*. In Tujia mythology, the Great General is valiant and warlike, achieving numerous victories against external enemies. In the Tujia language, "匠帅" means general, and "拔佩" means grandfather. Tujia and English belong to different language families, and there is no cultural concept equivalent to "匠帅拔佩" in the English context. A literal translation would fail to convey the character's identity and meaning to English-speaking readers, let alone transmit the cultural emotion and reverence associated with the name. Hence, the translator adopted a free translation method, rendering "匠帅拔佩" as "the Great General." Here, "General" retains the character's military status, and "Great" conveys his heroic excellence, thus facilitating the effective transmission of cultural information.

4. Beauty in Sound in the English Translation of Sheba Songs

Ethnic literature is full of unique rhythm and cadence. If a translator presents only the meaning of the original while omitting its sound and rhythm, the original's stylistic charm is lost. Therefore, besides conveying the beauty in sense, the translation of ethnic literature must also transmit the beauty of the original's sound, striving for consistency in rhyme and meter between the translation and the original. *Sheba Songs* features colloquial and dialectal characteristics, with numerous reduplications and rhymes, creating a unique phonetic beauty. In translation, to achieve the goal of "beauty in sound," the translator should preserve the original's rhythmic and onomatopoeic beauty as much as possible.

4.1. Rhythmic Beauty

Ancient Chinese poetic rhythm includes tonal patterns and rhyme; English poetic rhythm includes meter and rhyme^[10]. *Sheba Songs* frequently employs end rhymes and possesses a strong rhythm, giving it a musical beauty that makes it catchy, lively, and natural when sung. The absence of tones in English increases the difficulty of translation. Therefore, in the English

translation of *Sheba Songs*, the translator often preserves rhymes and flexibly adjusts the rhythm to recreate the original's artistic appeal and expressiveness.

ST5: 人哩地一路东西要耍，
地一路吃的找着耍。 [8]

TT5: Only hard work in the field,
Can ensure the next decent yield.
Only soil in the fertile fields,
Can bring about a harvest in the coming year.[8]

Analysis: This passage comes from Chapter 11, "Planting Winter Crops," in Part 4, "Song of Agricultural Labor," of *Sheba Songs*. It depicts the busy toil of the Tujia people working in the fields. The number of syllables per line in the translation is relatively regular, creating a stable rhythmic structure. The repetition of the sentence-initial words "Only" and "Can" enhances textual coherence and fluency. The ending of the first line, "field," rhymes with "yield" (/i:ld/), making it pleasant to read. Although "fields" (/fi:ldz/) and "year" (/jɪə(r)/) in the second line do not form a strict rhyme, the similarity in their final sounds still enhances the aesthetic quality of the translation.

ST6: 手搂脚搂等着耍，
头发绺着等着耍，
眼睛咕咕看着耍，
耳朵张起听着耍。 [8]

TT6: Hold still your feet and clench your fists.
Tie up your hair and wear your helmets.
Prick up your ears and open your eyes.[8]

Analysis: This passage comes from Chapter 2, "Fighting the Imperial Soldiers with Tujia Warriors," in Part 5, "Song of Heroic Stories," of *Sheba Songs*. It depicts the scene where the Tujia people are about to battle imperial troops. The lyrics aim to inspire the clansmen to stand firm against formidable foes and maintain their fighting spirit. The original four lines are neatly parallel and catchy when read. From a phonological perspective, "feet" and "fists" both begin with the /f/ sound; "hair" and "helmets" begin with the /h/ sound. This alliteration enhances the phonological harmony of the language. Although "ears" and "eyes" do not share the same initial sound, they end with the same /z/ sound, also producing a rhythmic effect. The vocabulary in this stanza is cohesive, the rhythm harmonious, and the reading smooth and natural.

4.2. Onomatopoeic Beauty

Onomatopoeia establishes a connection between sound symbols and conceptual meaning by imitating natural sounds, a universal feature of human language[11]. *Sheba Songs* contains numerous onomatopoeic words used to depict the daily activities of the Tujia people, showcasing the vitality of their ethnic culture. Translators should strive to preserve the original onomatopoeia to recreate the phonomimetic beauty of ethnic literature and highlight the Tujia ethnic flavor and cultural atmosphere.

ST7: 哎嗨！哎嗨！
力气用的耍。
船小拖上了。 [8]

TT7: "Hoy, hoy!"
"Hoy, hoy!"

They were exerting so much strength
That they were dripping with sweat.

Their boats were finally back to the waterway.[8]

Analysis: This passage comes from Chapter 3, "The Arduous and Winding Migration Road," in Part 3, "Song of Ethnic Migration," of *Sheba Songs*. It describes the scene of Tujia people encouraging each other during a long journey. The original "哎嗨" has onomatopoeic features, whose sense of rhythm and cadence needs to be preserved during bilingual conversion. In English culture, sailors often use "Hoy" as a work chant to boost morale. The translator rendered "哎嗨, 哎嗨" as "Hoy, hoy," whose rhythm approximates the pace of actions like tracking and punting. This allows English-speaking readers to visualize the scene of boat trackers and boatmen jointly hauling a boat to shore.

ST8: 吧咂盘冬吧咂咂,

吧咂盘冬吧咂咂!

吧咂盘冬吧咂冬!

吧咂咂盘冬盘![8]

TT8: Pa-ye-pan-dong-pa-ye-ye,

Pa-ye-pan-dong-pa-ye-ye!

Pa-ye-pan-dong-pa-ye-dong!

Pa-ye-ye-pan-dong-pan![8]

Analysis: This passage comes from Chapter 1, "Prologue to the Migration Song," in Part 3, "Song of Ethnic Migration," of *Sheba Songs*. It is a song sung by the Tujia people during the Sheba Festival celebration. During the festival, Tujia people dress in their finest clothes and hold activities such as singing, dancing, and ancestor worship to appease their forebears and pray for favorable weather, bountiful harvests, and family prosperity. Onomatopoeic expressions like "吧咂盘冬吧咂咂" lack specific semantic meaning but create a warm and exuberant atmosphere through their unique rhythmic pronunciation. The Sheba Festival is a distinctive Tujia ethnic celebration. The translator used a transliteration method, rendering the original onomatopoeia as "Pa-ye-pan-dong-pa-ye-ye" and adding hyphens between characters to enhance the rhythm, successfully conveying the festive and joyous atmosphere of the Sheba Festival.

5. Beauty in Form in the English Translation of Sheba Songs

"Beauty in form" means that the translation should preserve the form of the original as much as possible. *Sheba Songs* has relatively free syntax, unconstrained by traditional prosody, ensuring the lyrics are smooth and fluent, which facilitates oral transmission among the people. Regarding the use of rhetorical devices, *Sheba Songs* often employs metaphor, repetition, and parallelism to convey emotion. When translating, the translator needs to analyze the original's emotion, recreate the beauty of its structure and rhetoric, and make the translation consistent with the original in form and emotion as much as possible.

5.1. Structural Beauty

Syntactic parallelism is a prominent linguistic feature of ethnic minority ballads. Due to significant differences between English and Chinese, literal translation, while expressing the original meaning, often fails to preserve the original structure. Maintaining neat parallelism in English, striving for similar or symmetrical sentence patterns, can preserve the original format to the greatest extent and is an ideal choice for achieving formal equivalence[12]. In translation,

the translator can reproduce the structural beauty of the original by adjusting word order, adding or deleting function words, etc.

ST9: 衣服新的穿来了,
鞋子新的穿来了,
帕子新的带来了,
客人好伴请来了。[8]

TT9: Dressed up in new clothes,
Dressed up in new shoes,
Dressed up in new headscarves,
Bizikas are going to sing and dance.[8]

Analysis: This passage comes from Chapter 1, "Preparing for Sheba," in Part 1, "Song of the Origin of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity," of *Sheba Songs*. It depicts the lively scene in Tujia villages during the first lunar month, where people wear new clothes and shoes and invite guests to meals. The original sentences are neatly arranged and consistent in structure, ending with the particle "了" for rhyme. Chinese often omits the subject when contextually clear; although this passage has no explicit subject, it can be inferred that the "host" is inviting guests. English typically requires a subject. Therefore, the translation uses "Bizikas" (Bizika Village) as the subject. The first three lines use the alliterating adverbial phrase "Dressed up," repeated three times with "in new + noun," forming a parallelism that preserves the original's structural form to some extent.

ST10: 我们一起肉一下赶要哩,
我们一起鱼一下捉要哩,
我们一起茅草一下割要哩。[8]

TT10: Let's go hunting in the mountains.
Let's go fishing in the deep lake.
Let's reap thatches at the hill slope.[8]

Analysis: This passage comes from Chapter 1, "Being Ordered to Lend Sheba Ritual Implements," in Part 5, "Song of Heroic Stories," of *Sheba Songs*. It describes the host inviting guests to go fishing and cut grass together. The original sentences have neat parallel structures, each beginning with "我们一起", and place the verbs "赶", "捉", and "割" at the end, ending uniformly with the particle "哩". The English translation has a grammatically rigorous structure, skillfully using imperative patterns like "Let's go" and "Let's reap." It also adds location phrases such as "in the mountains," "in the deep lake," and "at the hill slope" to help readers perceive the spatial relationships, which also aids in preserving formal equivalence with the original.

5.2. Rhetorical Beauty

The fundamental purpose of translation is to convey the original message. Based on ensuring accurate information transfer, the translator should reproduce the original's rhetorical devices as much as possible[13]. Rhetoric is a primary means for *Sheba Songs* to express emotion, mainly including metaphor, personification, antithesis, and parallelism. When translating, the translator needs to see through the surface structure to convey the deeper meaning behind the rhetorical devices.

ST11: 猪一个喂呀水牛一样,
牛一头养哩老虎一样,
儿子养了冬瓜一样,
婆娘讨个花朵一样哩。[8]

TT11: Swines are as big as buffaloes,
 And buffaloes are as big as tigers,
 Young men are as stocky as white gourds,
 And their wives are as pretty as flowers.[8]

Analysis: This passage comes from Chapter 2, "Praying for a Bumper Harvest," in Part 1, "Song of the Origin of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity," of *Sheba Songs*. It portrays the Tujia people's longing for a better life. Tujia agriculture primarily involved rice and corn cultivation, while animal husbandry focused on raising pigs and cattle. They believed that a good life meant strong and fat pigs and cattle, healthy sons, and beautiful wives. Given the significant differences between Tujia culture and foreign cultural backgrounds, the translation employs explicit similes and adds adjectives like "big," "stocky," and "pretty" to explain the size of the pigs, the strength of the cattle, and the beauty of the wives, respectively. Thus, the translation remains consistent with the original in structure and tone, expresses the desirable life through metaphors, and makes the language more expressive.

ST12: 天上梭罗花,
 地上牡丹花,
 园里鸡公花,
 水里头浮萍花。 [8]

TT12: Sago flowers hanging high in the sky,
 Peonies standing low on the earth,
 Coxcombs shining in the garden,
 Duckweed flowers floating on the water.[8]

Analysis: This passage comes from Chapter 1, "Ingeniously Weaving Brocade," in Part 5, "Song of Heroic Stories" (specifically "The Story of Baiguo Niangniang"), of *Sheba Songs*. The original text shows a clear antithetical structure, with locations corresponding to locations and flower names corresponding to flower names. Considering this structure, the translator rendered the locations "天上", "地上", "园里", and "水里" as "in the sky," "on the earth," "in the garden," and "on the water," respectively. The flower names "梭罗花," "牡丹花," "鸡公花," and "浮萍花" were translated as "sago flowers," "peonies," "coxcombs," and "duckweed flowers." The resulting sentence structures are relatively neat, embodying a sense of formal beauty.

6. Conclusion

As a traditional Tujia folk song, the English translation of *Sheba Songs* is not merely a linguistic conversion but also a transmission of ethnic culture and aesthetic characteristics. Based on the framework of Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties Theory," this paper takes the English translation of *Sheba Songs* as a typical case study and analyzes the pathways to achieving beauty in sense, sound, and form in the English translation of ethnic literature from three dimensions: content, language, and form. The findings indicate that when translating Chinese ethnic literature into English, translators must not only ensure semantic accuracy but also consider the readers' cultural background. They should strive to convey the original's emotional connotations, rhythmic prosody, and structural form, thereby transmitting the unique cultural and value perspectives of ethnic literature to foreign readers and powerfully advancing the cross-cultural exchange of Chinese ethnic literature.

Acknowledgements

This work was financially supported by Higher Education Teaching Reform Project at China West Normal University (grant number: CWNUJG2024023), Key Project of Shu Dao Research Institute (grant number: SDYJB2402050), Key Research Center for Translation and Dissemination of Sanxingdui Culture (grant number: SXD25ZD01), and Nanchong Federation of Social Sciences 2026 Annual Key Project (grant number: NC26A043).

References

- Holm, D., & Meng, Y. Y. (2022). *The brigands' song: Serving in the army of a native chieftain*. Brill.
- Bender, M. (2017). *The borderlands of Asia: Culture, place, poetry*. Cambria Press.
- Huang, X. (2021). On the translation of Chinese ethnic classics: Values, problems and new thinking. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 27(4).
- Lu, X. (1973). *Outline of Chinese literary history*. People's Literature Publishing House.
- Li, M. (2004). Xu Yuanchong's 'Three Beauties' theory of poetry translation. *Journal of Chengdu University (Social Science Edition)*, (3), 83–84.
- Shen, G. R. (2015). Expanding the translational space of ethnic literature based on Xu Yuanchong's 'Three Beauties Theory'. *Guizhou Ethnic Studies*, 36(1), 119–122.
- Pan, Z. D. (2017). A new probe into the translation of artistic conception in classical Chinese poetry. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, (1), 95–104+149.
- Zhang, L. Y. (2018). *Sheba songs (A trilingual edition in Tujia, Chinese, and English)*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Wang, D. F. (2000). The cultural status of translated literature and the translator's cultural attitude. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (4), 3–9.
- Yan, X. Y. (2022). Examining translation strategies of different versions of the Epic of Buluotuo from a prosodic perspective. *Ethnic Translation*, (4), 30–39.
- Wang, L. (2018). Comparison and analysis of English onomatopoeia translation techniques. *Journal of Inner Mongolia Radio & TV University*, (5), 35–36+85.
- Ma, X. H. (2012). On the treatment of parallel structures in Tang poetry translation. *Journal of University of Shanghai for Science and Technology (Social Science Edition)*, 34(4), 264–267.
- Cai, L. J. (2022). On the treatment of literary rhetorical devices in translation. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 43(1), 181–186.