

# Functional Equivalence: A Social Semiotic Translation and Interpretation of Two Tujia Ballads

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**Abstract:** Tujia folk songs are created and spread in the work and life by Tujia people through ages, which condense the vitality of Tujia people and reflect the unique aesthetic concept and spiritual outlook of them. Tujia folk songs are all orally inherited. Enshi Tujia folk songs play a very important role in China's folk songs, and the translation of Enshi Tujia folk songs is of great significance to the Chinese Culture's Going Global. The social semiotics translation method pursues the goal of "correspondence in meaning and similarity in function" (functional equivalence) between the source language and the target language, which is especially suitable for the translation of Enshi Tujia folk songs. In the light of social semiotics, this paper tries to make a commentary on the translation of two widely circulated Enshi Tujia folk songs --*In Lunar October Comes Minor Spring* and *A Field-weeding Song*, and make a critical interpretation of their English versions from the referential meaning, linguistic meaning and the pragmatic meaning. It is pointed out that "correspondence in meaning and similarity in function" at multiple levels of referential meaning, linguistic meaning and pragmatic meaning can be ensured in the translation of Enshi Tujia folk songs by the application of relevant translation strategies.

**Keywords:** Tujia Folk Song, Translation, Social Semiotics, Enshi, Functional Equivalence

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## 1. Introduction

Tujia nationality, with a profound history and brilliant culture, is mainly distributed in Wuling mountainous area at the border of Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing and Guizhou in China. Tujia people are known for their talent in singing and dancing. With Enshi as the capital city, Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture founded on August 19, 1983 is the first autonomous prefecture in the Republic of China. Enshi Prefecture, located in the southwest of Hubei Province, is a multi-ethnic residence with 29 ethnic groups including Tujia, Miao, Dong, Han, Hui, Mongolian, Yi, Naxi and Zhuang, and the minority population accounts for 54% of the total population. The total area of Enshi Prefecture is 24,061.25 square kilometers, which is mainly mountainous with a subtropical monsoon mountainous humid climate and an average altitude of 1,000 meters. [1]

Tujia people have no written language, but oral language. Owing to the lack of transportation and information, the

communication between Tujia people is very difficult. They have to express themselves by shouting and singing. Then came Tujia folk songs, whose lyrics are very rich in content and varied in forms. The population of Tujia ranks No. 7 in all the 55 minority groups in China. [2] Tujia folk songs hold such an important position in China's traditional folk songs as included in List of National-Level Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage. [3] As an important part and the top priority of the entire Tujia culture, Enshi Tujia folk songs enjoy high popularity in Tujia folk literature and fully reflect the life, image, psychology and personality of Tujia people. Tujia folk songs are Tujia people's hymns to life and love, the unique artistic charm of which should belong not only to Tujia people, but also to all mankind. The translation of Tujia folk songs may give them a new life, thus make Tujia culture inherited and carried forward worldwide.

Folk song translation is different from literary translation or even poetry translation. It is interdisciplinary, involving anthropology, folklore, translatology, musicology, linguistics,

aesthetics, literature, philosophy, etc. When translating folk songs, special attention should be paid to the relationship between the translated version and the melody of the song, so as to conform to the music rules as much as possible and achieve the goal of singing. Therefore, folk song translation is a goal-focused activity. How to properly translate folk songs into foreign languages, what kind of theories to use and what translation strategies to adopt are what needs our constant exploration and research.[4] This paper intends to use social semiotics translation theory to discuss the translation of two popular Enshi Tujia folk songs--*In Lunar October Comes Minor Spring* and *A Field-weeding Song*.

## 2. The Translation and Interpretation of the Two Songs

Nowadays Tujia folk songs are recorded in Chinese. Influenced by regional culture, Enshi Tujia ethnic music has

formed its own distinctive musical style, which is divided into six genres, such as mountain songs, labor songs, grass-cutting songs and drums, custom songs, children's songs and love songs. Enshi Tujia folk songs describe Tujia people's living environment and daily habits from different angles, which are the product of their true emotion and life. As implied by the name, love songs sing for the love between men and women, and make a very important part of Tujia folk songs. Young men and women express their feelings by singing so that the other party can know their own thoughts. Tujia love songs are adapted from the beautiful love story of Tujia marriage, which are obsessed with nostalgia and simplicity, and are a true portrayal of Tujia men and women's love and affection. With special style and rich content, love songs have become the most developed genre among Enshi Tujia people. [5] Both *In Lunar October Comes Minor Spring* and *A Field-weeding Song* are widely circulated Enshi Tujia love songs, the translations and interpretations of which are as follows:

### 2.1. 十月小阳春 (In Lunar October Comes Minor Spring)

Table 1. The Original Text and English Translation of "In Lunar October Comes Minor Spring".

Chinese Version	English Translation
<p>十(shí) 月(yuè) 小(xiǎo) 阳(yáng) 春(chūn) [girl] zhēng yuè shì xīn chūn 1. 正月是新春, fēng chuī yè er shùn 2. 风吹叶儿顺, jiě er wò zuó zài xié duì mén 3. 姐儿我坐在斜对门, huō jì huō jì wéi wéi wǒ bú shì nǚ guāng gùn 4. 伙计、伙计、喂、喂, 我不是女光棍。 [boy] èr yuè shì huā cháo, 5. 二月是花朝, shēn shǒu bǎ jiě lǒu, 6. 伸手把姐搂, èr rén wǎn shǒu shàng gāo qiáo, 7. 二人挽手上高桥, huō jì huō jì wèi wèi wāi guō duì biē zào ma. 8. 伙计、伙计、喂、喂, 歪锅对瘪灶嘛。 [girl] sān yuè shì qīng míng 9. 三月是清明, quàn láng zuǐ yào wěn 10. 劝郎嘴要稳, dāo zǐ de zuǐ ér dòu fǔ xīn 11. 刀子的嘴儿豆腐心, huō jì huō jì wèi wèi nǐ shuō huà mò shāng rén 12. 伙计、伙计、喂、喂, 你说话莫伤人。 [boy] sì yuè shì lì xià 13. 四月是立夏, qíng mèi wá yào chū jià 14. 情妹妹要出嫁, mò bǎ nà ge qíng gē gē wàng jì dǎ 15. 莫把那个情哥哥忘记哒, huō jì huō jì wèi wèi shí cháng yào qiān guà 16. 伙计、伙计、喂、喂, 时常要牵挂。 [girl] wǔ yuè shì duān yáng 17. 五月是端阳,</p>	<p><b>In Lunar October Comes Minor Spring</b></p> <p>1. In lunar January comes the Chinese New Year 2. With the wind, the leaves are rustling here 3. Now I sit at the door facing your door 4. Dear pal, hello, I am single no more</p> <p>5. In lunar February is the birthday of flowers 6. Hand in hand we climb high towers 7. With outstretched hands you hold me 8. Dear pal, hello, what a good match are we</p> <p>9. In lunar March comes the Qingming Festival 10. Please, my love, hold your tongue more 11. You may have more bark than bite 12. Dear pal, hello, don't hurt others out of spite</p> <p>13. Lunar April is beginning of summer 14. My love will be married to her lover 15. But never forget how much I love you 16. Dear pal, hello, me you'll remember too</p> <p>17. Lunar May sees the Dragon Boat Festival 18. Good wine's offered upon guests' arrival 19. I'll bring the wine to you as you're present 20. Dear pal, hello, drink it to your heart's content</p>

Chinese Version	English Translation
měi jiǔ duì xióng huáng 18. 美酒兑雄黄，	
shuāng shǒu duān zài láng miàn qián 19. 双手端在郎面前，	
huò jì huò jì wèi wèi qíng gē gē cháng yì cháng 20. 伙计、伙计、喂、喂，情哥哥尝一尝。	
[boy]	
liù yuè sān fú rè 21. 六月三伏热，	21. In lunar June comes the dog days of summer
shàn zǐ jiè bù dé 22. 扇子借不得，	22. A cattail leaf fan can't part with its owner
sūi shuō péng yǒu yě hái hǎo ma 23. 虽说朋友也还好嘛，	23. Though we are friends so good and dear
huò jì huò jì wèi wèi nǐ rè wǒ yě rè 24. 伙计、伙计、喂、喂，你热我也热。	24. Dear pal, hello, such heat both you and I fear
[girl]	
qī yuè shì yuè bàn 25. 七月是月半，	25. Lunar July sees Ghost Festival coming
bǎi niǎo guī jiā xiāng 26. 百鸟归家乡，	26. Homewards are all lovely larks flying
nǐ kàn nà yáng qīǎo hǎn sān nián 27. 你看那阳雀喊三年，	27. On end cuckoos are crying for years
huò jì huò jì wèi wèi hái shì yí gè guāi guāi yáng 28. 伙计、伙计、喂、喂，还是一个乖乖阳。	28. Dear pal, hello, they are goody-goody dears
[boy]	
bā yuè xiù bā shā 29. 八月绣八纱，	29. Lunar August is for embroidering yarn
chén shí jiě xiù huā 30. 辰时姐绣花，	30. From early morn you do needlework to darn
nǐ kàn nà jǐ duō fēng liú hàn 31. 你看那几多风流汉，	31. You have seen so many men so amorous
huò jì huò jì wèi wèi sǐ zài nà huā shù xià 32. 伙计、伙计、喂、喂，死在那花树下	32. Dear pal, hello, they're under th' tree vigorous
[girl]	
jiǔ yuè shì chóng yáng 33. 九月是重阳，	33. Lunar September sees Double Ninth Festival
qíng gē yào lái wàng 34. 情哥要来望，	34. Every moment I await your arrival
wǒ yòu dǎ dòu fǔ yòu áo táng 35. 我又打豆腐又熬糖，	35. Doing my best I make sugar and tofu
huò jì huò jì wèi wèi xié wǎ zuò liǎng shuāng 36. 伙计、伙计、喂、喂，鞋袜做两双。	36. Dear pal, hello, n' two pairs of shoes n' socks for you
[chorus]	
shí yuè xiǎo yáng chūn 37. 十月小阳春，	
qíng gē gē mèi mèi tù zhēn qíng 38. 情哥哥(妹妹)吐真情，	37. Lunar October sees a golden minor spring
jīn shēng jīn shì bù diū nǐ 39. 今生今世不丢你，	38. Thanks for the true love to me my dear does bring
huò jì huò jì wèi wèi tóng mián yuān yāng zhěn 40. 伙计、伙计、喂、喂，同眠鸳鸯枕，	39. Never will I part from you in my life
huò jì huò jì wèi wèi tóng mián yuān yāng zhěn 41. 伙计、伙计、喂、喂，同眠鸳鸯枕。	40. Dear pal, hello, we'll live as lovebirds forever
	41. Dear pal, hello, we'll live as lovebirds forever

Enshi Tujia folk songs in chronological body exist largely. Lyrics embodying the sequence are usually placed at the opening of each verse, and the most prominent time sequence is to narrate or express feelings according to the passage of months such as in *In Lunar October Comes Minor Spring* which consists of ten verses (41 lines) and each of which opens with the name of a month from Lunar January to Lunar October. Minor Spring (Xiaoyangchun) originally refers to the period from the Winter Solstice to the Light Snow in China's Lunar Calendar, during which the weather is as warm as in spring and some fruit trees bloom for the second time. It is customary to call October of the lunar calendar Minor Spring.

The antiphonal love song sung in the sequence of natural

months tells the romance of the hero and the heroine. Taken as a clear line, time connects the love stories of the boy and girl in series to express their winding and steadfast love. Time and narrative go hand in hand in the song which has obvious time consciousness shown in three dimensions: natural time, social time and psychological time. Natural time is developed from physical time which exists objectively, and it is not subject to human will. Natural time is the physical basis of *In Lunar October Comes Minor Spring*. Any event that has happened is the product of social practice. Social time may or may not be synchronized with natural time. Generally speaking, the social time in Enshi folk songs is synchronized with the natural time as shown in *In Lunar October Comes Minor Spring*, mainly

because Enshi belongs to Wuling Mountain Area, and most people live a self-sufficient farming life. Although there have been great changes in today's life, people engaged in farming still account for a large proportion. Enshi folk songs are closely related to farming life. Natural time is usually the condition or background for the development of lyric of Enshi folk songs, and people's work and life generally follows natural time. [6] We can see examples in the song:

Example 1:

wǔ yuè shì duān yáng

五月是端阳，

Lunar May sees the Dragon Boat Festival

měi jiǔ duì xióng huáng

美酒兑雄黄，

Good wine's offered upon guests' arrival

In the Pre-Qin period, May was regarded as a poisonous month, and the fifth day was regarded as an evil day. It is said that evil spirits prevailed on this day, which caused harm to the world. Therefore, the ancients took this day as an epidemic prevention festival to avoid plague and poison. They row dragon boats and drink good wine --a kind of spirit with realgar in. Realgar has the efficacy of killing bacteria, expelling insects and relieving five poisons, and is also used to treat skin diseases. In ancient times, when there was no disinfectant such as iodine, adults apply this kind of wine on their foreheads, ears, nose, hands and feet, which was intended for disinfection and disease prevention. [7]

Example 2:

bā yuè xiù bā shā

八月绣八纱，

Lunar August is for embroidering yarn

chén shí jiě xiù huā

晨时姐绣花，

From early morn you do needlework to darn

In Lunar August, it is getting cooler and co and women begin to prepare winter clothes for the family, so it's a season for embroidering and sewing. As a part of "popular literature", Enshi folk songs reflect what is inseparable from people's spiritual world, so psychological time is the most complex and profound time consciousness of Enshi folk songs in which there are three different ways to construct psychological time. Firstly, it is formed in the lyrics of Enshi folk songs. In the lyrics, the hero/heroine tells his/her own psychological feelings, and he/she communicates in his/her past, present and future, which mainly promotes the development of the inner story of lyrics. Month by month (from lunar January to Lunar October), the hero and the heroine in the song grow to love each other, though the latter has been in an arranged engagement of April. Luckily, she escapes from that arrangement and marries the hero in October (minor spring). The hero and heroine experience large psychological changes with the ups and downs of their romance. Secondly, there is a kind of communication between the singer and the lyrics in the singing process, which leads to a certain integration with the singer himself through the singer's emotional expression. Thirdly, the communication between the mental time is expressed by the singer and the listener in the song. This kind of psychological experience needs to have face-to-face communication with the singer. *In Lunar October Comes Minor Spring* is an antiphonal love song the singer and listener take turns. The communication is achieved easily. [6]

## 2.2. A Field--Weeding Song

Table 2. The Original Text and English Translation of "A Field-Weeding Song"

Chinese Version	English Translation
hāo yāng gē 薅秧歌	A Field--weeding Song
dà tián hāo yāng háng duì háng hāo lái hāo qù wú xīn cháng 大田薅秧行对行薅来薅去无心肠	I weed in the field row by row but become absent-minded when doing so
yòu yào dī tóu chē bǎi zǐ yòu yào tái tóu wàng jiāo niáng 又要低头扯稗子又要抬头望娇娘	I look up at you my beautiful maid while pulling tare seeds in the field
hǎo xiǎng hé mèi dā gè bái yòu pà bié rén shuō duǎn cháng 好想和妹搭个白又怕别人说短长	How I wish a talk with you but I fear idle gossip will come and go
xīn huāng yì luàn lǎo chū cuò liú le bǎi zǐ chē le yāng 心慌意乱老出错留了稗子扯了秧	With a flutter in my heart I pulled rice seedlings instead of tare seeds
jiǎn gè luó sī dǎ guò qù dǎ shī mèi mèi huā yī shang 捡个螺蛳打过去打湿妹妹花衣裳	I picked up a snail shell and splashed water onto your colourful clothes
mèi mèi tái tóu wàng le wàng láng bǎ xiào liǎn duì tā yáng 妹妹抬头望了望郎把笑脸对他扬	My maid looked up at me and looked into my eyes with a beaming face
xiǎo mèi dǎ gè mǐn mǐn xiào xǐ dé xiǎo láng xīn huā fàng 小妹打个抿抿笑嘻嘻得小郎心花放	My fairy smiled at me endearingly and it makes me wild with joy
cóng cǐ qiān cháng yòu guà dù yì diǎn xiāng sī yōu yōu 从此牵肠又挂肚一点相思悠悠	From now on I cherish you fondly and miss you deeply and constantly

The function of folk songs mainly refers to the positive role reflected in the production and life of human society.[8] Tujia folk songs mostly originate from labor, which is an unconscious creation produced in farming life. 薅(hāo)秧(yāng) refers to the field work of weeding in the south of China. The purpose of it is to loosen the soil for the seedlings. Under normal circumstances, rice will be pulled out three

times, and the action of pulling out seedlings is extremely simple and mechanical, either by foot or by hand. It is conceivable that people are picking up rice while chatting, gossiping or flirting, etc. Gradually, these mutual exchanges have become an indispensable part of simple mechanical work. *A Field--weeding Song* is a good example. It is a folk song created during working in the field. The song consists of eight

sentences, which tells the singer's love for a beautiful girl, his action to attract the beauty's attention and her reaction. The song also reflects the simple folk customs of Tujia nationality.



Figure 1. Field-weeding Picture.

### 3. Comments on the Translation of the Two Songs

Perhaps the most pervasive and crucial contribution to an understanding of translating is to be found in sociosemiotics, the discipline which treats all the systems of signs used by human societies. No holistic approach to translating can exclude semiotics as a fundamental discipline in encoding and decoding signs.[9] Social semiotics originated from semiotics, semiotics and translology were originally two independent disciplines, and the linguist F. de Saussure was the first to realize the connection between language and symbols. He defined the term “semiology” and believed that the language problem was mainly semiotics. After that, C.W. Morris applied his semiotic view of Meaning to language research. He believed that language has the following three aspects: the referential meaning, linguistic meaning and the pragmatic meaning. [10] Halliday mentions “So when I say 'social-semiotic', in the first instance, I am simply referring to a definition of a social system, or a culture as a system of meanings.” [11] Social semiotics translation method points out that translation is the transformation of two symbols, two languages and two cultures. It is emphasized that translation is a cross-language, cross-cultural and cross-social communication activity. The process of translation is to seek functional equivalence in the target language, and try to be faithful to the source language in meaning and function. [12] It shows that social semiotics translation method is well applicable for the translation of Enshi Tujia folk songs. This research will give a commentary on the translation of *In Lunar October Comes Minor Spring* and *A Field-weeding Song* from C.W. Morris' semiotic view of Meaning (the

referential meaning, linguistic meaning and the pragmatic meaning).

#### 3.1. Referential Meaning

The referential meaning refers to the meaning embodied by the relationship between the sign and the signified. The referential meaning also refers to conceptual meaning or dictionary meaning, which refers to the objective things mapped to readers by words, sentences and texts. To show the referential meaning, literal rendering is taken.

Example 1:

sān yuè shì qīng míng  
三月是清明，  
quàn láng zuǐ yào wěn  
劝郎嘴要稳，  
dāo zǐ de zuǐ ér dòu fǔ xīn  
刀子的嘴儿豆腐心，  
huǒ jì huǒ jì wèi wèi nǐ shuō huà mò shāng rén  
伙计、伙计、喂、喂，你说话莫伤人。

In lunar March comes the Qingming Festival,  
Please, my love, hold your tongue more,  
You may have more bark than bite,  
Dear pal, hello, don't hurt others out of spite.

“嘴要稳”，“莫伤人”are respectively put into “hold your tongue more” and “don't hurt others out of spite”. The English version retains the referential meaning of the source text, and the simple explanation makes it easy for the target readers to understand.

Example2:

dà tián hǎo yāng háng duì háng hǎo lái hǎo qù wú xīn cháng  
大田薅秧行对行薅来薅去无心肠

I weed fields row by row but become absent-minded when doing so

“row by row” and “absent-minded” are direct presentation of the referential meaning of 行对行 and 无心肠, which vividly show the working environment and psychological state of the singer.

Translatability between languages is determined by the basic equivalence of referential meanings. As polysemy exists, it is an important task for translation to correctly understand and reproduce the referential meaning of the source text. Take

dòu fǔ  
豆腐 as example. It appears twice in *In Lunar October Comes Minor Spring*--刀子的嘴儿豆腐心 (Line 11),

wǒ yòu dǎ dòu fǔ yòu áo táng  
我又打豆腐又熬糖 (Line 35). The latter refers to a local food and transliteration is used in the translation (tofu) which reflects the life of Tujia people and follows the rhythm of the source text, while the former is a metonymy and pragmatic meaning should also be counted in besides referential meaning.

#### 3.2. Linguistic Meaning

Linguistic meaning is the meaning embodied by the relationship between symbols. To put it simply, it refers to the meaning expressed and formed by the context. It contains the meaning formed by the relationship between words,

sentences and chapters. That is to say, language symbols with linguistic meanings are not isolated from articles, but belong to the whole system.

#### Example 1:

男唱: 二月是花朝,  
伸手把姐搂,  
二人挽手上高桥,  
伙计、伙计、喂、喂, 歪锅对瘪灶嘛。

[boy] In lunar February is the birthday of flowers  
Hand in hand we climb high towers  
With outstretched hands you hold me  
Dear pal, hello, what a good match are we

From the context, we can know 歪锅、瘪灶 here refer to the hero and heroine and are used to show modesty, but not indicate that there is something wrong with the pot and the stove. So 歪锅对瘪灶嘛 are translated as what a good match are we.

#### Example 2:

又要低头扯稗子又要抬头望娇娘  
好想和妹搭个白又怕别人说短长

I look up at you my beautiful maid while pulling tare seeds in the field

How I wish a talk with you but I fear idle gossip will come and go

娇(jiāo) 娘(niáng) and 妹(mèi) refer to the same person—the beautiful maid. “come and go” is an amplification to make the meaning of the sentence complete.

### 3.3. Pragmatic Meaning

Pragmatic meaning is the meaning embodied by the relationship between linguistic signs and translators. Pragmatic meaning refers to the influence of language symbols on the recipients of texts, including symbolic meaning, associative meaning and implied meaning, that is, cultural meaning.

#### Example 1:

刀子的嘴儿豆腐心,  
伙计、伙计、喂、喂, 你说话莫伤人。

You may have more bark than bite,

Dear pal, hello, don't hurt others out of spite.

“刀子的嘴儿豆腐心” is a well-known saying in China. Here, the translator does not adopt literal translation, but goes to an English saying with close meaning “One's bark is worse than one's bite.” for fear that target readers may have different understandings of “mouth”, “heart”, “knife” and “tofu”.

#### Example 2:

好想和妹搭个白又怕别人说短长

How I wish a talk with you but I fear idle gossip will come

and go

“搭白” is local dialect which means “accost sb.” or “have a talk with”. When “短(duǎn)” and “长(cháng)” are put together, they don't mean “short” or “long” any more in Chinese, but construct a new cultural image—idle gossip. Free translation ensures the expressiveness of the translation.

## 4. Conclusion

From the analysis above, we can see that Enshi folk songs have their own characteristics in language. Lots of rhetoric, local dialects and rhyming sounds can be found in them. It is almost impossible to pursue the complete equivalence of rhyme, meaning and spirit in the translation of them. Each verse of *In Lunar October Comes Minor Spring* has its rhyme (s); except for the last line, all the lines in *A Field-weeding Song* rhymed “ang” in Chinese. But in the translation, they were changed in order to relate the target readers to the songs. There are a number of fundamental problems involved in studying translation adequacy in terms of readers' responses, but in general, it is best to speak of “functional equivalence” in terms of a range of adequacy, since no translation is ever completely equivalent. [9] We translators should pay special attention to restoring the referential meaning, the linguistic meaning and the pragmatic meaning of Enshi folk song to achieve functional equivalence in translation and thus promote the dissemination of them.

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