

# Modernity in Xu Yuanchong's translation thoughts

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**Abstract:** *Xu Yuanchong, as an outstanding contemporary translator in China, has made important contributions to promoting the translation of Chinese literary works and the going out of Chinese culture. Xu Yuanchong summed up Chinese poetry translation as "beautify art, create competition for excellence" in translation practice, and his translation theory has strong foresight and modernity, which has a positive influence and important role in promoting the innovation and development of Chinese literary translation theory and cultural propaganda. Therefore, the study on modernity of Xu Yuanchong's translation thoughts is helpful to clarify the historical value and orientation of his translation thoughts, and can also provide some modernity schemes for Chinese translation circles.*

**Keywords:** *Xu Yuanchong; Translation thought; Poetry translation; Modern thinking; Translation culture*

## 1. Introduction

Xu Yuanchong once had an incisive discussion on translation: "Translation is translatable, but very translatable; Forget the shape, get the meaning. Proud, the beginning of understanding; Forget, the mother of expression. Therefore should be proud, in order to its same; So can forget, to keep its difference. Both out of the same name, the same name: complacent, seeking common ground while reserving differences; The Way of translation ". Professor Xu Yuanchong is a genius in the field of translation. He translated thousands of years of Chinese literary classics into English verse and French verse and published them. He introduced the essence of Chinese culture to the world and paved the way for Chinese culture to ascend to the throne of the world literary circle. Professor Xu has published and translated 60 books in Chinese, English and French at home and abroad. He is the only expert who has translated Chinese poetry into English and French verse. In view of this, this paper intends to start from modernity, take the course of Chinese translation thought as the vertical axis to reveal the transcendence of Xu Yuanchong's translation thought which is different from the tradition, take the western translation thought of the same period as the horizontal axis to investigate the modern choice of his translation thought, and make a vertical comparison to clarify the key of his ideological value and ideological orientation. The horizontal investigation can provide some reference and inspiration for the construction of modernity program in line with the reality of China.

## 2. Overview of Xu Yuanchong's Translation Thoughts and Modernity

### 2.1. Xu Yuanchong's Translation Thoughts

Xu Yuanchong is an outstanding representative of modern and contemporary Chinese translators. He translated a large number of ancient Chinese poems and made great contributions to the spread of Chinese culture and the improvement of the status of Chinese literature in the world. Mr. Xu's translation theory is based on the practice of literary translation. On the one hand, he inherits the aesthetic concept and artistic pursuit of traditional Chinese translation thoughts, and puts forward the theories of three beauties, three similarities, three transformations and three aspects, as well as the theory of three potentials and the theory of cultural competition. The new theoretical innovation emphasizes the possibility and necessity of the translation surpassing the original text. As a professional translator, Xu's theory emphasizes the translator's conscious consciousness and creative rights, which is different from the mainstream translation theory based on "faith" and emphasizing the translator's obligation. However, with the outline of translation as an independent discipline becoming clearer, the discipline itself growing and the translator's status increasing, It has become the general trend of translation theory to pay attention to the positive role and great influence of translators and translation readers in the process of translation,

because translators not only have the obligation to be faithful to the original work but also have their own creative rights. This is the basis for the formation of Xu's translation thought, which represents the translators' pursuit of freedom of expression and creative rights in the process of translation, and reflects the difficulty in realizing the idealized standards of translation theory in literary poetry translation. Therefore, the study of Xu Yuanchong's theoretical thought and system provides a concrete case for us to further study the translator's creative rights and the independence of translation discipline, which is a beneficial subject for the development of translation discipline. This paper studies modernity in Xu Yuanchong's translation thoughts.

## **2.2. Modernity**

Modernity is a complex but unambiguous concept. It is complex in that it can be understood in a variety of dimensions such as material, spiritual, institutional and disciplinary as well as in different directions of time and space. Modernity not only manifests in the field of "technology", "market economy", "contractual ethics", "fashioning", "enlightenment", and "subjectivity", but also in different stages of maturity. It is clear that modernity, despite its multiple dimensions, has a general spiritual connotation.

However, in the aggregate, modernity is "modern" as opposed to "past" or "tradition". Modernity has also become a topic of close attention for scholars. As for its general spiritual connotation, some scholars believe that modernity is "a spirit of reasoning and enlightenment, a highly developed scientific spirit and humanistic spirit, which enables society to move towards science and progress"; some scholars regard the spirit of criticism and free creation as the basic characteristics of modernity; others regard individual subjectivity and self-awareness, rationalization and contractual public culture as the basic characteristics of modernity.

To sum up, modernity generally implies a certain rupture from tradition, which includes the transformation of social connection and the manifestation of individual rationality, subjectivity and the spirit of science, criticism and free creation. Although scholars have their own preferences, modernity as a whole is characterized by a global orientation in terms of social contact, a manifestation of subjectivity in terms of the individual and spiritual origin. From the perspective of spiritual sources, the core manifests itself as the exertion of rational spirit.

## **3. Modernity Compared with Traditional Chinese Translation Thoughts**

### **3.1. Cultural Considerations of Translation with a Global Perspective**

Different from the traditional idea of translating from the strong into the weak out of the revival of danger, Xu Yuanchong translated out of confidence and sharing. By distinguishing economy from culture and Chinese and Western languages, he first broke away from the traditional weak psychology. Far from feeling inferior to others, Xu was confident of Chinese culture. He once quoted 75 Nobel Prize winners in 1988 as saying, "If mankind wants to continue to survive, it must go back and learn the wisdom of Confucius." He believes that globalization is also the globalization of culture. Chinese culture can provide nourishment for the economically strong United States, and the "righteousness", "harmony" and "love" of Chinese culture can make up for the disadvantages of "profit", "violence" and "sex" of the United States. For this reason, in terms of translation practice, Xu Yuanchong has been translating traditional Chinese classic poems, Ci, songs, novels and dramas since the 1980s. He has broken the previous idea that the country is powerful by translating into Chinese, and turned to translating out to share excellent Chinese traditional culture with confidence<sup>[1]</sup>. In terms of translation direction and material selection, he has demonstrated a new cultural consideration different from the tradition. It is with similar attitude and psychology that Xu Yuanchong has confidence in translation theory that he can contribute to solving the problems of Sino-Western translation theory for the world.

In addition, Xu Yuanchong advocates two-way translation, holding that both Chinese and Western cultures have advanced points, and advocates translation for mutual learning and enriching world culture, which, to a certain extent, gets rid of the traditional binary opposition mentality between China and the West and shows a new ideological pattern of co-construction of world culture. In the 1980s, China's translation work mainly focused on how to serve the modernization of the country, to translate science, technology and other materials from other countries for reference and reference of foreign experience, and to promote mutual understanding and a peaceful international environment. This position does not break away from the Chinese and Western binary opposition, translation for our own use of the traditional

thinking<sup>[2]</sup>. Xu Yuanchong believes that the cultural responsibility of Chinese literary translators is to export part of the blood of Chinese culture and import part of the blood of foreign culture, so as to enrich the world culture. Therefore, while translating traditional Chinese classics into English and French, Xu Yuanchong also translated French and English literary classics into China one after another to help the literature of the three countries into the world through translation, which reflects his global cultural consideration of pursuing beauty and sharing.

### ***3.2. The Explicit Expression of the Rational Spirit in Translation***

The difference between theory and experience lies in reason. Rationality pursues a complete and self-contained theoretical system. Compared with traditional Chinese translation thoughts, the modernity of Xu Yuanchong's translation theory is as follows: First of all, it breaks through the concerns of traditional translation methods and systematically constructs epistemology, skopos theory and methodology of translation. Traditional Chinese translation theories pay more attention to the difficulties and importance of translation, the methods and standards of translation are close to the practical experience, and pay more attention to how to translate, but rarely discuss what translation is and why. On this basis, Xu Yuanchong began to systematically construct epistemology, skopos theory and methodology of literary translation. Xu Yuanchong called his translation philosophy translation theory, in which epistemology only talks about his understanding of translation, Skopos theory only talks about the purpose of translation, and methodology only talks about the method of translation. Secondly, there is not only a sense of innovation, but also a sense and tendency of clarity in the theoretical category<sup>[3]</sup>. Some scholars believe that from the perspective of theory, the traditional Chinese translation theory uses the categories of theism, imaginary and real, artistic conception and so on, and lacks accurate definition. On the one hand, Xu Yuanchong "often uses some concepts and terms of fuzzy mathematics, physics and other disciplines to discuss translation issues; On the other hand, it also explains some key concepts such as translation and literary translation. For example, "translation is the unity of two languages" and "literary translation is not only the unity of two languages, but also the unity of two cultures".

### ***3.3. The Manifestation of the Personality of the Translation Subject***

From the point of view of the origin of translation, it is "to provide language symbol conversion and interpretation services for people who encounter difficulties in understanding and expressing heterologous symbols in the process of cross-language information transmission and cross-cultural communication". It seems to be common sense at home and abroad that translators should be loyal to each other, whether interpreting or translating. In order to serve others, the author is usually the master, the translator is the servant, the source language is the master and the target language is the vassal. From the perspective of Chinese traditional translation theory, Dao An's "Five lost roots, three difficult", Xuan Zang's "five No turning", Yan Fu's "faithfulness, elegance", Fu Lei's "likeness of spirit", Qian Zhongshu's "transformation of the environment" and so on. Xu Yuanchong has obviously broken away from the psychological normal of translators as servants, and has stepped forward from the cautious "faithful" tradition to the creation of the translator's subject. In the aspect of translation theory, he put forward the "theory of reinvention", "theory of compensating loss by creation" and "theory of competitive advantage" as the new master of translation, and put his theoretical propositions into practice in a large number of translation practices. From the perspective of his translation practice and related theories, Xu Yuanchong believes that translators have the right, necessity and ability to give full play to their creativity.

First of all, since the translation and the original work are both copies, the translator and the author have the same right to create. Xu Yuanchong believes that "both the translated work and the original work can be compared to painting", "the translated work should not only copy the original work, but also copy the model the original work imitates". Although this idea does not completely overthrow the authority of the original work and the author, it holds that the translation must still be bound by the original work, but it has shaken the traditional idea that the original work is the only model. Just like the original work, translation can also be a copy of the "model". Therefore, although the translator cannot do whatever he wants, he should also enjoy the right to create based on the basis of freedom.

Secondly, literary translation is art, and art seeks beauty, while the beauty of the original text is often lost in translation. Therefore, in order to convey beauty, it is necessary for the translator to be creative. On the value ladder, the pursuit of beauty is higher than the pursuit of truth and good, which is the subject's relatively free grasp of the object on the basis of truth and good. If the pursuit of truth in translation is based on the objective meaning of an imagination, the pursuit of goodness in translation is based on the needs of individuals, groups or human beings, and the pursuit of beauty in translation is the

translator's higher pursuit of following his heart without exceeding the moment of truth and goodness. Xu Yuanchong puts the goal of literary translation in the higher value level of seeking beauty and finds the necessity justification for translators' creative freedom.

Finally, a large number of successful translation examples show that translators have the ability to take the initiative to make up for the loss of the original. Xu Yuanchong once quoted Qian Zhongshu as saying that Lin Shu's translation "has not lost its appeal" and "deserves to be reread". In contrast, the more faithful translation later gives an example of "preferring to read the original text" to illustrate that Lin Shu's translation is a little disloyal but has some advantages. He also gives examples of how he is better than other translations by making up for losses.

#### **4. Modern Thinking Compared with Western Translation Thought**

##### ***4.1. The Absorption of Western Modernity Strategies***

The formative period of Xu Yuanchong's translation theory was the period when Nida's translation theory was very influential in China. Nida tried to establish a science of translation, seeking invariable laws in the rheological and complex phenomena of translation. His theory pursued objectivity and systematism, showing a typical purpose-instrumental rationality<sup>[4]</sup>. Xu Yuanchong also pays attention to the "certainty, stability and universality" of literary translation, and tries to find the invariable law of literary translation. According to its "special" and "common" analogy, he advocates that it is not necessary to use a knife and fork to learn Western diet, but to learn its delicacy, science and hygiene. Therefore, his translation theory in the long history of Chinese translation has unprecedented reflected the conscious refinement, scientific, systematic characteristics, should be inspired by the western translation theory of the same period of the "common".

Xu Yuanchong pays special attention to the differences in specific translation situations. Although Nida's translation theory has great influence, the translation between Western languages is different from that between Chinese and Western languages. Xu Yuanchong believes that the distance and difficulty of translation between Chinese and Western languages and cultures is far greater than that between western languages and cultures<sup>[5]</sup>. Therefore, he should combine Chinese translation practice to construct a theory that can solve the problem of Chinese literature translation. In *The Art of Translation*, Xu Yuanchong said that the philosophical basis of his literary translation theory is that "theory comes from practice and should be tested by practice, and practice is the only criterion for testing theory". It shows that Xu Yuanchong attaches great importance to practice and regards practice as the foundation of his theoretical cognition. In addition to his emphasis on practice, Xu Yuanchong also treated literary translation differently from other types of literary style, holding that literary translation is art, so its criteria and goals should be different from other types of texts<sup>[6]</sup>. This is a discourse that distinguishes the different worlds of nature, society and individuals, which is consistent with Habermas' communicative rationality. Xu Yuanchong's typical strategy in dealing with Chinese and Western issues is to throw away the incompatibility between Western translation theories and Western philosophical thoughts and absorb the advanced thoughts or methods behind them for his own use.

##### ***4.2. The Modern Transformation of Inheritance and Transcendence***

Xu Yuanchong's translation theory is rooted in traditional Chinese classical translation theory or literary theory and has maintained an ideological succession relationship with traditional Chinese translation theory. Typical examples include the theory of "Beautifying art, creating excellence is like competition", which in addition to his own ideas, also contains the thoughts of Confucius, Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Zhu Guangqian, Fu Lei, Qian Zhongshu, etc<sup>[7]</sup>. He learned from Chinese and Western families, integrated and innovated with his own ideas, and formed a more obvious line of "inheritance and transcendence" in his modern transformation<sup>[8]</sup>. The results show that compared with the modern transformation of Western translation theories, the transformation of Xu Yuanchong's translation theory does not have the mature and systematic basis of modern scientific theory as that of western modern linguistics. In the theoretical expression, his personal practical experience as the leading argument is also common. No matter in terms of the general spiritual connotation of modernity, or in terms of the logic, objectivity and systematization of translation theories, his translation thoughts have been characterized by modernity, but they have not yet reached the stage of complete maturity.

It is worth noting that Xu Yuanchong maintains a multicultural value from beginning to end, and does not translate or talk about translation from a single Chinese or Western perspective<sup>[9]</sup>. He pursued the

scientific systematization of translation theory, but always based on China's own translation reality. With an open mind, he learned from Chinese and Western families and insisted on exploring a way of "how to transform and apply traditional spiritual resources to promote modernization"<sup>[10]</sup>. Compared with the Western language school's translation theory, which overleaps the tradition with linguistic theory, Xu Yuanchong tries to base himself on his own practice and literary theory tradition to learn from both ancient and modern Chinese and Western literature, so as to realize the modern transformation of Chinese translation theory.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, although Xu Yuanchong's translation thought is in line with the tradition, the translator's subjectivity, compared with the traditional Chinese translation thought, has shifted from faithfulness to creativity, and the theoretical construction also shows a clear sense of self-consciousness, systematic scientific awareness and category clarity. His global cultural orientation, individual subjectivity and the rationality show that Xu Yuanchong's translation thought is clearly different from traditional Chinese translation thought in terms of its general modernity. From the perspective of China and Western countries, the modernity of Xu Yuanchong's translation thought is mainly manifested in the choice of an autonomous path in dealing with the relationship between China and the West, the ancient and the modern. In handling with the Sino-West issues, Xu Yuanchong mainly adopts the solution of removing the "differences" and taking the "common" in the face of Western translation theories or ideas based on his own context. His translation theory is also the result of removing the incompatibilities between Western translation theory and Chinese translation context, and absorbing the advanced methods of Western translation theory. On the issue of modern transformation from the ancient to the modern, Xu Yuanchong adopts the "inheritance and transcendence" which both inherited and transcended Chinese tradition and Western modernity, which, on the whole, results in an obvious but incomplete modernity. The modernity of Xu Yuanchong's translation thought is an important transition from traditional to modern, and his modern transformation from traditional to modern is the key to his ideological value in the history of Chinese translation, which is also a classic example of modernity that can be followed in the translation field today.

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