

Aesthetic Translation Theories in China and the West

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ABSTRACT. *The exploration of translation and translation theory has left a long stream behind it both in China and in western countries. The author reviews the literary translation theories both in western countries and in Chinese translation traditions briefly. Then the author finds that the criteria of prose translation are inseparable to aesthetic theories through comparison of the different versions.*

KEYWORDS: *Aesthetic translation theory, Criteria, Comparison*

1. Introduction

In China, the development of translation though, since its birth in the third century, has experienced four stages: source-text orientation, faithfulness, closeness in spirit, and sublimation. (Liu Miqing, 1995:1032). Whereas, in western countries, since the first century B.C., the exploration has also gone through the process of development from the dispute between word for word translation and sense for sense translation to an age of philosophic- poetic theory and hermeneutic inquiry in eighteen and nineteen centuries until more recently to an interdisciplinary study on the basis of modern linguistics, cross-cultural studies, etc.

Judging from the explorations in China and in western countries, translation theory has never ceased to seek reference from aesthetic.

The unique aesthetic nature of literature determines that aesthetics is an important approach to assess the value of both literature and its translation. Criticism divides literature into different categories, or genres: poetry, drama, prose and fiction. Literary translation is a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a literary work in one language by the same in another language. For the aesthetic nature and social function of literary translation, many famous translators and translation theorists have their own opinions. In the next following, after introducing the source of aesthetics, the author will introduce some representative translation opinions about aesthetic of aesthetics; the author will introduce some representative translation opinions about aesthetic translation in prose of many translation theorists both in China and in western countries.

2. The Source of Aesthetics

Aesthetics is the study of beauty and taste, whether in the form of the comic, the tragic or the sublime. Aesthetics, also spelled Esthetics, derived from the Greek word---aesthesis. It is the theoretical study of beauty and taste constituting a branch of philosophy. As a branch of philosophy dealing with nature, creation and appreciation of beauty and taste, aesthetics was introduced by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten in 18 century.

In 1750, when German classic philosopher Baumgarten first proposed the term" Aesthetik", it was intended to be the study of perception or perceptual thinking rather than logic. This term was subsequently applied to the philosophical study of all arts and manifestation of natural beauty. And according to Zhu Guangqian(1979:3), aesthetics is the study of beauty.

Version translation as an art operates simultaneously at two aesthetic levels of form and content, both of which should be addressed so as to establish the aesthetic identity of verse translation. The unique aesthetic nature of verse translation determines that aesthetics is an important approach in assessing the artistic value of both prose and translated texts.

3. The Aesthetic Translation Theory in the West

As we know, western translation theories have been greatly attached to aesthetics for a long time before the entrance of the modern linguistics. The theories are based on the study of philosophy and aesthetics, which has

lasted for more than 1800 years.

The first western exploration of translation began with Marcus Tullius Cicero(106-43 B.C.) and Quintus Flaccus Horace(65-8 A.D.). Their stress was laid on sense for sense translation and the aesthetic criteria of the TL produced.

St Jerome(347-420) and St. Augustine(354-430) were the followers in the flow of western translation theories. The former proposed that translation mostly lied on the nature, so the translated text should be as simple as the daily language. The latter proposed that in the process of translation, the translator must notice three styles: simplicity, elegance and sublimity and they were requirements of the readers.

From the fourth century A.D. to the 17th A.D., with the spread of Christianity, Bible translation became the major concerns of western translators. Martin Luther(1483-1542), as the most influential Bible translator, also laid emphasis on the significance of producing an accessible and aesthetically satisfying vernacular style. Later a noted English translator of Homer George Chapman(1559-1643) realized that the good translation must grasp “spirit” and “tone” of the source text, so the translated text can be regarded as a transmigration of the source text(Susan B.M.,2002:61)

Alexander Fraser Tytler (1747-1813), a renowned English translation theorist in the eighteenth century, set up three principles of translation which focus upon the reproduction of idea, style and ease of the original.

Benedetto Croce(1866-1952) was a distinguished aesthetician and literary essayist in Italy. In his masterpiece *Estetica*(1948), he expressed his thought like this: literary translation was a process of art recreation. Ezra Pound (1885-1972) is not only a great poet, but also a famous translator. He said: “Rime looks very important. Take the rimes of a good sonnet, and there is a vacuum.” (Pound, 1929: 30).

One of the most noteworthy may be the renowned American scholar Eugene A. Nida, who writes in his book *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (2003: 128) that “translating consists in reproducing in the reader language the closet natural equivalent of the source language, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style.” Here, “meaning” is not only related to lexical elements, but also to other linguistic or non-linguistic factors which contribute to the understanding and appreciation of a literary work.

As seen from the history of western translation theory, translators never ceased to take in nutrition from aesthetics. As Liu Miqing (1995: 58) put it: “In the west, the bud of translation theory was first bound to the tree of philosophic-aesthetics and has stood for as long as one thousand and eight hundred years.”

4. The Aesthetic Translation Theory in China

Reviewing the history if Chinese translation, we can get a conclusion: aesthetics is the foundation of Chinese traditional translation theory. It came about 1700 years ago. Like western translation theorists, Chinese translation theorists have also tried their hands in the study of the translation principles. Their views, however, are quite different from those of their western counterparts. The Chinese translation theorists pay more attention to the aesthetic elements rather than the linguistic factors in translation, because they believe that the aesthetic study of a text is to seek for spiritual similarity or resemblance rather than linguistic equivalence between languages.

The first exploration of translation artistry can be traced back to 220-230 A.D., when Zhi Qian quoted that Lao Zi's maxim that “beautiful words are not faithful, and faithful words not beautiful” (Liu Miqing 1995:1) in defense of literal adherence to the original text as the basic principle for scripture translation, thus introduced into translation studies the time-honored aesthetic controversy of beauty versus truth which hung on for seventeen centuries in China.

Humarajiva(334-413) led the first stage and he challenged Zhi Qian's source text oriented Principle . Later ,Xuan Zang spared no effort to revise the principle of strict literalness both in sentence structure and expression with a view to improving the fluency of his Chinese translation,thus upgrading the source---text oriented principle to the principle of faithfulness.

The second stage was ushered in by Ma Jianzhong (1845-1900) in 1894 . Afterwards, Yan Fu (1854-1921) develops Ma's principle and set forth the Three-character Criterion: faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance. Lin Yutang, the author of *Moment of Peking* (1939), put forward his translation criteria: the first is fidelity, the second is coherence, and the third is elegance.”

The third stage was marked into being when discussion of faithfulness went slowly to a marginal place in 1920s and 1930s. Fu Lei(1908-1966), a celebrated Chinese translator, reiterated the theoretical viewpoint of

“closeness of spirit” and “formal closeness” and put forward his principle of “striving for spiritual closeness rather formal closeness” (Sun Yingchun, 2001: 324).

In 1960, Qian Zhongshu(1910-), a learned Chinese scholar and translation theorist, offered his view of “sublimation”.

Xu Yuanchong (1984: 134) puts forward three principles of verse translation, namely: (1) the preservation of the original beauty in sense; (2) the preservation of the original beauty in sound; (3) the preservation of the original beauty in form. Xu Yuanchong (1984: 129) also suggests that the order of importance of preserving the three “beauty” is not the same, rather, “Beauty in sense is in the first place; beauty in sound the second and beauty in form the third. The ideal, best state is to preserve the three at the same time.

With the above description of the historical development of Chinese translation theory, it is no exaggeration to say that traditional studies of translation have never ceased to seek theoretical reference from Chinese classical aesthetics, chiefly in the area of literary aesthetic.

5. Similarities and Dissimilarities between West and China

5.1 Similarities

During the long course of development, western and Chinese translation aesthetics have experienced ups and downs and share many similarities in translation principles, approaches, procedures etc.

Firstly, both Chinese and western translation theories have gone through the process of development from dispersive statements to monographs which reflects the common law of development. Secondly, they both have experienced the dispute between literal and free translation.

5.2 Dissimilarities

Confined by the limitation of the aesthetic subject's intuition and appreciation and weakness in objective analysis, traditional studies of translation in China are characterized by their fuzziness and ambiguity in logical intension. As compared with Chinese translation studies, western translation studies pay much attention to explicit definition and clearness of logical intention.

Influenced by different systems of philosophy, culture and language, they have their distinctive features as well. Western traditional philosophy, though having passed through different stages, mainly regards human beings and nature as incongruous. It lays stress on dualism rather than holism. While through years Chinese traditional philosophy had laid great emphasis on harmony, integration and the mingling of opposites. Therefore, the differences between western traditional philosophy and Chinese traditional philosophy have exerted a great influence on translation studies. The influence is especially remarkable in the following aspects.

Chinese traditional studies of translation trend to pay much attention on the wholes rather than parts, on intuition rather than reasoning. Therefore, the success of a translation work depends mainly on the perception and empirical insight of the translator rather than systematic investigation of its structural elements and logical verification. Moreover, in China, translation theories are but a set of much talked-about principles or criteria such as “faithfulness, expressiveness, elegance” and “closeness of spirit” which can hardly break away from controversial discussions on literal and free translation and have been left to stick with classical literary aesthetics or philosophical aesthetics. Western translation studies, on the other hand, are inclined to lay emphasis on rational and impersonal analysis of structural elements. Therefore, western translation theorists are more likely to approach translation studies from various perspectives and fort systematic conclusion on translation theory. They have never ceased to seek theoretical reference from linguistics, poetics, philosophy, semeiotics, cross-culture studies etc to build their translation theories.

In all, similarities and dissimilarities in Chinese and western aesthetic traditions may help us find out the commonness and idiosyncrasy, the universality and particularity between them so that we can get enlightenment from western translation theories and develop those of our own.

6. A Brief Summary of the Existing Studies on English Versions of the Prose

The prose have been translated into a variety of English versions. These translations see diversity in form and content. These provide translation researchers with an abundant source of materials. In the community of English

translation studies, considerable literature can be found on the English translations of the three pieces of works. The target texts, the research subjects, and the research approaches of these studies will be reviewed below.

First, the existing researches tend to focus more on the translations of the first prose: Zhang Peiji's *Transient Days*, Zhang Mengjing's *Days Gone By* and Zhu Chunshen's *Rush*, the translation of the second one: Zhang Peiji's *The Sight of Father's Back*, Yang Xianyi's *My Father's Back* and David E. Pollard's *The View from the Rear*, the translation of the last one: Zhu Chunshen's *Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond*, David E. Pollard's *The Lotus Pond by Moonlight*, Yang Xianyi's *The Lotus Pool by Moonlight*, Wang Jiaosheng's *Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond* and Li Ming's *Moonlight Over the Lotus Pond*. Some studies make comparisons between two versions of one piece, ending up with a conclusion that one of them is better than the other, or that a combination of their advantages will help to create a better translation of the prose. Less attention is paid to the comparison in terms of both form and content of the three pieces of work from the aesthetic viewpoint.

It can be seen that most of the attention has been paid to the issues at the micro level. Efforts have been made; detailed and in-depth analyses have been made in the discussion of translation of the specific items, for instance, image reproduction, rhythm, rhetoric, emotion, etc, despite the intimate connection between form and content in a prose work. Yet, not enough attention has been paid to the issues at the integrative level except for Xin Chunhui's essay "On form and content of target text---A comparative study of Zhang Peiji's and Zhang Mengjing's target texts of Zhu Ziqing's famous essay *The Transient Days*. The essay attempts to compare the different versions from sound, structure and meaning levels and prove the multiple relationships between form and content. It points out that sound, structure and meaning are closely connected as an integral whole in prose translation.

The research approaches of the existing studies are mainly prescriptive. The general mode can be described as "Standard – Comparison – Comment": firstly, translation standards or criteria are established based on some kind of translation theory; secondly, a translation (or more translations) of the three pieces is measured with these translation standards; and finally, comments are made to commend or criticize the translation.

On the other hand, the approach from the aesthetic perspective has drawn some researchers' attention. A case in point is "Prose Translation from Aesthetic Perspective" by Zhu Yige and Lu Min in 2000. This paper analyses beauty in form, content and style during prose translation from the aesthetic perspective based on Zhu Chunshen's translation of Bei Ying, and points out all levels of aesthetic properties should be conveyed and the beauty in form, content and style between the original and the translation should be unified. Another one is "On the Translators' Aesthetic Thoughts in Translating He Tang Yue Se into English" by Gan Wenping in 2002. This essay discusses the aesthetic thoughts of the eminent Chinese translators Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang by analyzing their translation.

To sum up, the researchers have had some discussions on specific subjects in the study of Zhu Ziqing's prose and achievements have been made. The criticism on the translation of Zhu Ziqing's prose works has seen a gradual shift from the micro level to the level of unification of form and content from the aesthetic perspective. And apart from a few studies, the research efforts are largely confined to the translations by Zhang Peiji, Zhu Chunshen and Yang Xianyi. The subjects at the different levels are repeatedly chosen and discussed. In view of the above summary of the existing study of Zhu Ziqing's prose, the author will focus on the following aspects: first, to widen the scope of target texts by including not only Zhang Peiji, Zhu Chunshen and Yang Xianyi's translations but also translations done by other translators such as Zhang Mengjing, Wang Jiaosheng, David E. Pollard and Li Ming; second, to emphasize the aesthetic equivalence of form and content in the translation activities through comparison and analysis.

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