

A Case Study of Translator's Subjectivity and Cross-cultural Communication: A Chinese Perspective

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Abstract:

The paper makes an in-depth study of the manifestation of translator's subjectivity through the comparison of four English translations of a Chinese classic *San Zi Jing*, and tries to find out the underlying controlling factors for their varied ways of translation. Based on the relevant discussions on translator's role, it shows that translators did play an active part in the course of translation, whose deliberate choice is often influenced by some constraints, namely, the translator's personal background, and the social context they are in. Through the descriptive analysis, it aims at making an objective evaluation of the role of different translation in the history of cross-cultural communication.

Keywords:

Translation, *San Zi Jing*, Subjectivity, Cross-Cultural Communication

1. Introduction

Translation as one of the important ways of cultural transmission and exchange, has played an indispensable role in the development of human society and civilization. That is especially true of the great classical works like religious or literature classics in the promotion of communication and understanding among people. Hence the translation of which has never lost the appeal for translators. Since two translations of the same source text will not be identical, then questions arise: How do translators deal with the same source text differently? Why different translations emerged in the specific time and place? And finally, how should we evaluate the role of these translators in the context of cross-cultural communication?

As the main actor of translation, translators play an important role in translation. However, for a long time translators have been regarded as "translation machines" or "servants" of the originals, and the significance of whom in the translation activity has been neglected. Since the "cultural turn" in translation studies in 1980, increasing attention has been given to the translator, the producer of translation work. Many scholars touch upon the issue of translators, thus the role of translators has been redefined. Based on the relevant discussions on translator's role and cross-cultural

communication, this essay will make an in-depth study of the manifestation of translator's subjectivity through the comparison of four English translations of a Chinese classic *San Zi Jing*, and tries to find out the underlying controlling factors for their varied ways of translation; It also aims at making an objective evaluation of the role of different translation in the history of cross-cultural communication.

2. Theoretical Framework

The discussion of translator's role in translation opens up new space for translation studies. Many scholars agreed that translators have certain power in the process of translation, not only from the selection of source texts, but to the understanding, interpretation and producing of the translated text, and translation is compared to a process of making decisions. But as to why translators make the specific decision, different explanation was given.

Philosophically, subjectivity, or the characteristics of the subject, is shown in its objective activities, with subjective initiative as its most prominent feature. In translation, the translator's subjectivity is manifested by the subjective initiative he or she takes despite the various constraints on them [1].

So after a careful study and comparison of the previous research on the topic, I try to classify the constraints on translators' subjective initiative into two categories: the internal factor and the external factor, in accordance with the two aspects affecting the exertion of subjectivity, one of which comes from the subject itself and the other from its surrounding influences. The former concerns the translator's individual background including his/her family, education, occupation, value system and other personal details. The latter is related to the time background, the dominating ideology, and the patron, etc.

2.1. *The Internal Factors - the Direct Agent*

The translator, as an ordinary human being, has his/her own thoughts and feelings, likes and dislikes, as well as different experiences and background, all of which will exert great influences on the translation. So the discussion of translation should start from the translator and the main constraint on translation can be firstly found in the translators themselves. This study tries to investigate the internal factors from the aspect of the translator's personal background (family, education, occupation, etc.), his/her value system such as their understanding on translation and the purpose for their translation, and their attitude towards cultures and their implied readers.

2.2 *The External Factor—the Deeper Agent*

The display of subjective initiative is not only under constraints from the subject itself, but from the objective environment and conditions surrounding it. In translation, the translator's subjectivity is influenced by various constraints. Based on relevant discussions, this study tries to investigate the external factors from the time background, the dominating ideology, and the patron, etc.

3. A Case Study

Throughout the history of mankind, translations have made great classical works known to people worldwide. Some classical works like religious texts and literary classics are translated again and again, in which noticeable differences are found.

Then why do translators deal with the same source text differently? And how should we evaluate the role of these translations in the context of cross-cultural communication? The study will take four English translations of a Chinese classic, *San Zi Jing* as an example, and tries to find out the underlying factors for the varied ways of translation based on the relevant discussions on translator's roles.

3.1. A Brief Introduction to *San Zi Jing* and Its Translations

San Zi Jing is a famous book for children's enlightenment in China, and the widely spread version of which was written by Wang Yinglin from the Southern Song Dynasty. It is rich in content, covering a wide variety of topics including the introduction to traditional Chinese ethics, philosophy and classics, the emphasis on the importance of learning and teaching, and an overview of the Chinese history. Besides, it has prominent features in its form, namely, being fair-sounding in rhyme and orderly in form with three characters in one line and four lines in one stanza. *San Zi Jing* has helped pass Chinese culture and tradition down from generation to generation and has made traditional Chinese ethic better accepted by children. Its rich cultural connotation and distinctive style also aroused foreign attention, thus it has been spread overseas and translated into many languages including Latin, Russian, French, English, and German etc. The translation of *San Zi Jing* into English began with Robert Morrison in 1812 in the Qing Dynasty, and more than thirty different versions appeared since [9]. Among the vast variety of translated texts, this study will chose four of them as cases to carry out the discussion, namely, *Horae Sinicae: Translations from the popular literature of the Chinese* by Robert Morrison; *San Tzu Ching: Elementary Chinese* by Herbert A. Giles; *The Triword Primer* by Wang Bao tong and Li Li and *The Three Word Primer* by Zhao Yanchun. For convenience, these four translated versions will be called Morrison's, Giles's, Wang's, and Zhao's respectively in the later discussion. All of the four cases are chosen for being influential and qualified translations of the original text. Though sharing some qualities of successful translation, they do manifest personalized decision making in the course, which may be a reflection of the constraints on the translators.

3.2. Varied Translations

3.2.1. Morrison's

Morrison took the four-line stanza as a paragraph and translated it in the style of prose, while not giving a word by word, or clause by clause translation to the original text, and with occasional footnotes for explanation.

Example (1)

San-tsi King.

In the beginning of man, his nature is good.* the operation of nature is immediate; of custom, remote.

If not instructed, nature becomes changed. In learning the path of virtue, excellence consists in devoted application of mind.

In ancient times, the mother of the philosopher Meng-tsi lived in a neighborhood, where the boy did not learn; in consequence of which, through grief, she cut asunder the web which she was weaving.

* This is explained as referring to every person at the time of birth. [5]

Generally speaking, domestication method is employed in the translation of the content. Liberal or free translation method is used more, even proper names is not transliterated directly. As is shown in the example, ‘孟母’ is translated as ‘the mother of the philosopher Meng-tsi.’

3.2.2 Giles’

Giles’ version is made up of two parts: the translation (a liberal translation to each line) and the paraphrasing, which includes not only the phonetic transcription and a word-to-word translation to each word, but also a reference to each word according to *shuowenjiezi* (the first Chinese dictation). The translation has no elaborate focus on rhyme. Generally speaking, it is translated in a fluent and easily understood way; though Giles had tried to retain the original layout of a poem, the rhyme was lost in this version.

Example (2)



Figure 1. An Excerpt from Giles’ Work [2].

Jen is a picture of the object, - Shakespeare’s forked radish. Like all Chinese characters, it is the expression of a root idea, humanity, collectively and individually; and its grammatical functions vary in accordance with its position in a sentence and the exigencies of logic. The context, line 3 and 4, here calls for a plural.

Chih originally meant to issue forth as grass from the ground; and by extension, to meet, to arrive at. It has come to be used conventionally as a sign of the possessive case, a particle of subtle influence, and a demonstrative pronoun; also, from its shape, = zigzag.

3.2.2. Wang’s



Figure 2. An Excerpt from Wang’s Work [7].

Wang's is a creative reproduction of the original. Firstly, most of the lines are restricted to three or four words so a rhythm is achieved. Secondly, it tries to retain the original rhymed poetic character by using rhyme, alliteration, and assonance. Besides, each page is illustrated with pictures to show the purport, so the message of the original text is transferred in a way easily understood by the target readers.

Example (3) sees the Figure 2.

3.2.2. Zhao's

Zhao's adopts the fixed rhyming scheme of "AABB" throughout the whole translation, and retains the original Chinese form of three-word a line and four-line a stanza. Besides, it has the phonetic transcription to each character and an elaborate explanation to the implied meaning of each stanza both in English and Chinese. On the linguistic level, the author tries to transfer message in a way easily accepted by the westerners.

Example (4)

(1)

rén zhī chū
人之初，
xìng běn shàn
性本善。
xìng xiāng jìn
性相近，
xí xīng yuǎn
习相远。

Man on earth,
Good at birth.
The same nature,
Varies on nurture.

人在太初或刚出生时其本性都是善良的，由于后天成长环境、教育背景不一样，性情也就有了各种各样的差别。

Man was good in the beginning, or he is good at birth. Human nature deviates due to different natures.

Figure 3. An Excerpt from Zhao's Work [8].

4. Discussion: Why Different Translations Emerged in the Specific Time and Place?

Although all versions have managed to communicate the general message embodied in the original text, each translation does show unique decision-making in the dealing with the form and the choices on the lexico-grammar level. Then what might be the underlying factors contributing to the variations among translations.

Since translation is influenced not only by the translator's personal background, his/her value system, and their attitude towards cultures and their 'implied readers',

but also by the time background, the dominating ideology, and the patron. As a short, encyclopedia-like book about China, *San Zi Jing* has become the first choice for Westerners to understand China. So for both Morrison and Giles, the direct reason to translate *San Zi Jing* may be that it's not only a good way to know China and Chinese better, but a channel to let it known to the west.

However, comparatively, Morrison's translation is not as polished as Giles', which is quite understandable viewing from the personal and social background then. Robert Morrison was the son of a devout believer in Christianity, whose upbringing inspired his aspiration to pursue a priest's life. In 1804 he applied to the London Missionary Society to go on a mission in China and was approved. And four years later, Morrison began his trip to China via the United States and arrived at Guangzhou by way of Macau with three objectives assigned by the church: mastering Chinese, compiling an English-Chinese dictionary, and translating the Bible into Chinese, with the first being the basis for the latter two [4]. Though most European countries achieved unprecedented development and longed for external expansion since the beginning of the 19th century, especially after the revolution in science, politics and industry, the government of the Qing Dynasty implemented a foreign policy of locking the country and exclusiveness. Under such a background, foreign religion could hardly enter China, and foreigners were even forbidden to live in China, let alone mission. So Morrison had to stay in Guangzhou in the disguise of a businessmen, and during the 27 years stay in China, he only took two brief trips back to England. So there was a missionary purpose for Morrison all along. Moreover, Though Chinese is regarded as one of the most difficult languages in the world with a great number of dialects, Morrison didn't have much opportunity to learn the language from the natives, and he could only manage to learn it from a Cantonese. And it was in 1812, only five years after he arrived did he take up the translation, so the difficulty he came across in the process (understanding, interpreting and delivering) could be unimaginable, which might explain why he was not able to appreciate and reproduce the poetic characteristics of the original Chinese text, and which was not attached to. So for him, the purpose of translation was to understand the language and to know about China, which is also one of the tasks he was given at the beginning of his mission by the Church. As he once said, "I hope this book will be accepted by the British public and will help to satisfy their curiosity about this extraordinary country over the past two decades," [4]. And his book indeed fulfilled that end and has its contribution in the promotion of cross-cultural communication.

Whereas Giles had quite a different experience, he was a diplomat and had spent many years in various posts in China, including translator, assistant consul, vice consul and consul of British consulate in various Chinese cities. During his stay in China, he got familiar with the Chinese language and the Chinese culture and when he returned home he was appointed professor of Chinese at the University of Cambridge in 1897, where he immersed himself in the study of Chinese culture and became a well-known sinologist. China has been forced to open its door and establish foreign relations since the first Opium war, but there were not many works about China then and most of them were biased and stereotyped against the real China, with which Giles seemed dissatisfied. As a talented sinologist who was fascinated by Chinese culture and had rich personal experience, Giles tried his best to show the real China through his translation and writing. Some scholars [6] thought this rebellion against the dominant ideology and poetics might be relevant to his early experience when his father was persecuted for religious reasons, which might be an explanation

for the great importance Giles attached to the source text. For example, the layout of Giles' version put word at its center, stresses the trinity of the form, sound and meaning of Chinese characters, which is a good guide and facilitator for beginners to learn Chinese and at the same time understand the traditional Chinese culture and ideology. On the language level, as his expected readers are missionaries, diplomats and other interested group in Britain and other English-speaking countries, it caters to the western expression habits to the greatest extent and puts all his effort into the translation of meaning rather than the rhyme scheme despite his excellent language ability.

Both Wang Bao tong and Zhao Yan chun are prestigious scholars in China. As for their personal background, they share a lot in common. Firstly, both are university professors with great academic achievements, and are interested and talented in poetry translation, for example, Wang has published a lot of books and papers in the field of English poetry, translation of Chinese poetry and classics, Zhao has translated *The Book of Songs* and many poems by famous ancient Chinese poets like Li Bai, Wang Wei, and Li Qing zhao, etc. Secondly, both are very rigorous, meticulous and knowledgeable. And most importantly, both have a deep love for their own culture and are willing and eager to share it with foreigners. So their choosing to translate *San zi jing* is in accordance with the dominant ideology and poetics in China. Though both Wang and Zhao, bearing a sense of strong cultural confidence, are determined to disseminate the Chinese culture through their translation, Zhao seems to be more determined to let the original beauty of traditional Chinese verse known to the west.

It may not be difficult to reproduce the message, but to retain the original form of three-word a line and four-line a stanza and the rhymed verse feature that is convenient for recitation is not easy at all. Since English and Chinese has different pursuit to prosody. Firstly, unlike the English rhythm which is based on stressed syllables and is produced by the repeat of stressed and unstressed syllables, Chinese rhythm is involved around word which is like a one-syllable word in English. As there is no consonant cluster, *San Zi Jing* reads like a trimeter in English. Meanwhile the rhyme in Chinese is not as varied as that in English. Since a Chinese word pronunciation is made up of a Sheng Mu which serves as the consonant and a Yun Mu which functions as the vowel, Chinese rhyme can only rest on Sheng Mu or Yun Mu, the result of which can be compared to the English alliteration or assonance.

Therefore, the main difference between Wang's and Zhao's translation may lies in their handling of the rhyme and rhythm. Comparative, Zhao's is a more rigid reproduction of the original in form as he sticks with a fixed rhyming scheme of "AABB" and the form of three-word a line and four-line a stanza throughout the whole version. Wang's manifests a compromise of effort between the Chinese and English prosody with no more than five word each line and varied rhyme schemes.

A review of China's cultural development strategy may shed some light onto it. As a classics on Confucianism, *San zi jing* was once totally criticized and denied during the period of the so called 'Cultural Revolution'. Since the implementation of the Reform and Opening-up policy, China has witnessed the continual and fast economic development. And with the increase of its comprehensive national strength and its international status, the national pride and confidence is promoted. Hence there appeared a craze for traditional Chinese culture, especially ancient intelligence and wisdom. Meanwhile, the significance of *San Zi Jing* is not only recognized in China, but worldwide. In 1990 its English version in Singapore was ranked as a worldwide

Primer by the UNESCO. In this context, *San Zi Jing* was revised in 2008 and was first published by People's Education Press in Beijing. And in the same year, Wang's translation was published.

In 2011, the basic connotation of "Chinese culture going global" strategy came up at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 17th CPC Central Committee, which stressed the importance of deepening the culture system reform and promoting vigorous development and prosperity of socialist culture. For this purpose, multiple publicity approaches were suggested like strengthening cultural exchange, to constantly expand the international influence of Chinese culture, enhance the competitiveness of cultural industries and further improve the cultural soft power of China. Zhao's translation appeared in that context in 2014.

Besides, there is a strong advocacy of translators' cultural awareness among China's scholars in recent years, who hold that under the trend of Chinese culture 'going global' strategy, advocating 'cultural awareness' in translation is conducive to the promotion of national cultural confidence as well as revealing the cause of many translation disputes [3], and that China's cultural classics are a carrier of the country's ideology and culture as well as its art, aesthetic, values and world views. And a translation that is faithful to the source text in both content and form becomes vitally important [10]. Therefore, Zhao's seeming rigid translation may be a deliberate attempt to enhance the literary image of contemporary Chinese literature and its position in the world literature.

5. Conclusions

Through the comparison of four English translations of a Chinese classic *San Zi Jing*, the study finds out that the variation in translation is the result of the translators' subjective choices and there are reasons for their move during the course of translation. This further proves that translation, as an activity of cross-cultural communication, is under various constraints. Therefore putting it in the context of cultural exchange, we can have a better understanding of some translations in human history, most of which were produced in a specific background and have promoted intercultural communication in a certain era, just like different translations of *San Zi Jing* did.

Cross-cultural communication in its essence is a dialogue between native culture and foreign culture which inevitably involves the collision, conflict and fusion of ideology, values and way of life, which is also true of translation. Therefore it is better for the translator to have the consciousness of cross-cultural communicators to better play its role, since the translator's stance towards the culture of the source language and the culture of the target language is always hidden in the translation. In the accelerating process of globalization, much attention should be given to the maintenance of cultural diversity and the avoidance of cultural hegemonies. So that all cultures in the world can coexist peacefully.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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