

# Translators' Subjectivity in the Choice of Texts

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**Abstract:** Translators' subjectivity, to some degree, determines the final output of the translation. It can be studied throughout the whole translation process. This paper focuses on translators' subjectivity reflected in choosing source texts. With some case studies of leading translators in China, the paper finds that translators can take the initiative to choose the texts out of their own taste or for their own purpose. This is how translators' subjectivity plays a role in the choice of texts.

**Key Words:** translators' subjectivity; choice of texts; the taste-oriented school; the purpose-oriented school

## I. Introduction

Translators' subjectivity, to some degree, determines the final output of the translation. It can be studied throughout the whole translation process. Choosing source language texts as the first step in translating, also involves translators' subjectivity. In any culture, there exist numerous literary texts of various subjects, in different genres, and for people in all walks of life. How does the translator choose the text from those abundant materials? Are there any underlying rules and principles regulating his/her choice? Some hold that ideology of the society has the say. In his paper, *Ideology and the History of Literary Translation in 20<sup>th</sup> Century China*, professor Wang Yougui (王友贵) points out that "the four translation modes in that time have much to do with ideology," and "it is particularly distinct between the 1950s and the 1970s that ideology dominates the choice of texts."<sup>[1]</sup> Some others believe that "the choice of translated texts is much influenced by such

TL cultural parameters as the position of the TL culture, its internal need and its receiving and approving the SL culture.”<sup>[2]</sup> Nevertheless, although it is a fact that the choice of the text is influenced by many factors, it cannot be denied that the translator enjoys great freedom in the decision of the source text. He/she can take the initiative to choose the text either out of his/her own taste or for his/her own purpose. That is to say, what kind of text he/she would like to translate is finally decided by the translator himself/herself instead of anyone or anything else (professional translators may not belong to this category). So far as choosing the text is concerned, the translators are divided into two schools here: the taste-oriented school and the purpose-oriented school. Case studies of leading translators are used as a basis for the discussion.

## II. The Choice of the Taste-oriented School

As the saying goes, interest is the best teacher. Quite a few translators enjoy translating those texts suiting with their taste. That may account for the reason why so many poets are good at translating poems. In the history of translation in China, a great many translators are well-known poets themselves, among whom are Guo Moruo (郭沫若), Wen Yiduo (闻一多), Zha Liangzheng (查良铮), Yu Guangzhong (余光中), Bian Zhilin (卞之琳) and so on. Professor Wang Zuoliang (王佐良) once said that only poets were able to translate poems well because it involved some poetic talents for translating some poems. It is out of question that translators of this kind enjoy the pleasure in translating poems because they know what a poet is and accordingly know how to reconstruct the poem in the TL. According to Yu Guangzhong (余光中), translation is also creation, at least is creation to some degree. When considering a certain word or sentence pattern, the translator is just like the writer who is writing.

Fu Lei (傅雷), a famous translator of French literature, was mainly devoted to translating Balzac's novels because he believed that “ Choosing original texts is just like making friends. Some simply cannot go with me well, so I will not force myself to make friends with them.”<sup>[3]</sup> That is why he declined the invitation of the People's Press to translate *Red and Black* in the 1950s. He clung to his belief

throughout his translation career. Jane Austen's works, as he once commented, pay too much attention to daily trivialities and will bring little benefit to readers in our country. However, it is Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, that is liked best by Professor Sun Zhili (孙致礼), a contemporary translator famous for his translations of this writer. What attracts him most is just her insight into daily matters and her vivid description of common people.

Another translator falling into this school is Bing Xin (冰心). When she talked about translation, she said that she translated only a few literary works. She had her own principles for choosing the texts. First, the works she would like to translate should be attractive to her and written originally in English. Second, she translated personal essays or novels but not poems.<sup>[4]</sup> She believed that the poem was of strong music sense, and she was afraid of the losing of this musicality in the poem if translating it. Then she refused to translate poems. Yu Dafu (郁达夫), in the preface of his translation collection, mentioned three criteria for choosing the texts, two of which were similar to those of Bing Xin's. Besides, he would choose the text carrying the similar characteristics to his own works.<sup>[5]</sup> Examples of the same kind are too numerous to mention. Anyway, it can be seen that one shared characteristics of the taste-oriented school is that they care much about whether or not the text attracts them.

### III. The Choice of the Purpose-oriented School

Functionalists consider translation as a purposeful activity, which can be further illustrated by the following quotation:

Human actions or activities are carried out by 'agents', individuals playing roles. When playing the role of senders in communication, people have communicative purposes that they try to put into practice by means of texts. Communicative purposes are aimed at other people who are playing the role of receivers. Communication takes place through a medium and in situations that are limited in time and place. Each specific situation determines what and how people communicate, and it is changed by people communicating. Situations are not universal but are embedded in a cultural habitat, which

in turn conditions the situation. Language is thus to be regarded as part of culture. And communication is conditioned by the constraints of the situation-in-culture. <sup>[6]</sup>

This quotation conveys the main theory of the functionalists. It helps readers understand why translators have their own purposes in the process of translation, of course, including the choice of the texts. In terms of the agents in translation, translators, "... enable communication to take place between members of different culture communities. They bridge the gap between situations where differences in verbal and non-verbal behavior, expectations, knowledge and perspectives are such that there is not enough common ground for the sender and receiver to communicate effectively by themselves." <sup>[7]</sup> When playing the role of senders in communication, translators have communicative purposes that they try to put into practice by means of texts. Different texts mean different medium and situations. Since specific situation determines what and how people communicate, the choice of the text turns out to be of great importance.

Translators from the purpose-oriented school could care less the artistic value of the source text. Instead, what they care about is the possible influence of the target text in the target culture. If the text does not fulfill their particular purpose, translators of this school will not translate it, even though it may be world classics. John Fryer (1839—1928), one early outstanding translator who was devoted to introducing the western scientific and technological works into China, once said in his letters home that, "In order to enlighten Chinese people, it is the holy responsibility for me to translate books from English into Chinese." <sup>[8]</sup> As to the choice of the text, he emphasizes "freshness" and "present usefulness." <sup>[9]</sup>

Looking back through the history of translation in China, it is obvious that dozens of translators aimed at reforming the social system or making our country powerful by means of translating. Lu Xun (鲁迅), who wanted to awake those unenlightened people and call upon them to stand up against feudal ruling, chose novels from small and weak Eastern European countries at that time. <sup>[10]</sup> Another two typical representatives are Yan Fu (严复) and Lin Shu (林纾). Sun Baoxuan (孙宝暄) wrote in his diary that "There are two outstanding translators at present. One is Yan Youling (严又陵), the other is Lin Qinnan (林琴南). The former is

good at translation theory and the latter at narration.”<sup>[11]</sup> Yan Fu and Lin Shu were town-fellows and good friends of similar ages. They both achieved much in translation but in different areas. Yan chiefly translated western works of social science while Lin mainly translated western literary works. If it is the ideology of the society that lays a strong influence over the purpose of translators, the different choices of Yan Fu's texts and that of Lin Shu's prove the existence of the translator's subjectivity. Like Lin Shu, Zhou Guisheng (周桂笙), one contemporary of him, translated many literary works. However, unlike Lin Shu, Zhou mostly translated detective stories and scientific fiction, for he intended to introduce “western civilizations and laws” and to “disseminate scientific knowledge.”<sup>[12]</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

To sum up, translators, no matter which school they belong to, (in fact, the two schools are not so clearly divided as they seem to be), do enjoy the freedom in choosing the texts. Their differences lie in the fact that they have different focuses. For all of them, Professor Wang Zuoliang has a piece of advice: “A translator should translate only texts which have similar styles to him. Translating indiscriminately will inevitably lead to bad translations.”<sup>[13]</sup> Besides, Fu Lei also gives good suggestions in terms of the source text: (1) With regard to the type of literature, the translator should be well aware of his strength and weakness. Those who are not expert in reasoning should not translate theoretical books; those who cannot write poems should not translate poems to avoid the loss of poetry. (2) With regard to the genre of literature, the translator should make clear what genre is the most suitable one for him to translate: the romantic or the realistic, the classical or the modern. Even in a specific genre, it is good to know which writers are suitable for him/her or which works of a certain writer are suitable for him/her to translate.<sup>[14]</sup>

However, it cannot be denied that ideology and patronage are two important factors laying great influence on the choice of source texts. In the present paper, this author tries to discuss the subjectivity of the translator in the choice of source

text on the premise that the target text can be published. In this case, to accomplish a good translation, a translator should, above all, be cautious and serious in choosing the source texts which are most suitable for his/her own taste and can fulfill his/her own purpose. Or it is out of the question to get a successful translation.

注释:

- [1] 王友贵,《意识形态于20世纪中国翻译文学史(1899—1979)》,《中国翻译》2003年第5期,第14页。
- [2] 张德让,《论译语文化与文本选择》,《外语教学》2001年第3期,第67页。
- [3] 陈福康,《中国译学理论史稿》,上海:上海外语教育出版社,1996,第389页。
- [4] 申雨平、戴宁主编,《实用英汉翻译教程》,北京:外语教学与研究出版社,2002,第57页。
- [5] 陈福康,《中国译学理论史稿》,上海:上海外语教育出版社,1996,第277页。
- [6] Nord, Christiane, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001, p. 1.
- [7] Nord, Christiane, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001, p. 17.
- [8] 陈福康,《中国译学理论史稿》,上海:上海外语教育出版社,1996,第94页。
- [9] 陈福康,《中国译学理论史稿》,上海:上海外语教育出版社,1996,第97页。
- [10] 郭著章,《翻译名家研究》,武汉:湖北教育出版社,1999,第5页。
- [11] 陈福康,《中国译学理论史稿》,上海:上海外语教育出版社,1996,第131页。
- [12] 陈福康,《中国译学理论史稿》,上海:上海外语教育出版社,1996,第164—165页。
- [13] 郭著章,《翻译名家研究》,武汉:湖北教育出版社,1999,第424页。
- [14] 陈福康,《中国译学理论史稿》,上海:上海外语教育出版社,1996,第390页。