

A Study on Self-Translation of *Taipei People* From the Perspective of Translator's Subjectivity

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Abstract

Based on translator's subjectivity and Chinese-English corpus, this paper analyzes Pai Hsien-yung's self-translation of *Taipei People* in terms of subjective initiative, passivity and purposefulness. The self-translation is concise, intelligible and fluent, reproducing the original spirit and style to the greatest extent and exactly implying translator's active intervention. The author as a translator meanwhile can both exert great subjectivity and be constrained by his own political stand, cultural background, translation purpose as well as specific social and historical background. The bilingual self-translator tends to show a complete understanding of the original text and focus on the deep meaning of the original text. The source text is revised appropriately to make the translation more readable and acceptable to the target readers.

Key words: *Taipei People*; Translator's subjectivity; Self-translation studies

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1. INTRODUCTION

Taipei People, a collection of fourteen short stories written by Pai Hsien-yung and published in 1971, is

hailed as a modern classic. It portrays the ups and downs of people from all walks of life, including sing-song girls, high-toned ladies, elder statesmen, ancient domestics and scholars, who sought refuge in Taiwan in the 1950s following the collapse of the Kuo Min Tang regime on the mainland. It ranked seventh among the top 100 Chinese fictions awarded by *Asiaweek* in June, 1999. Its English version was created by Pai Hsien-yung and Patia Yasin. George Gao, as the editor, was responsible for polishing the translation. Based on translator's subjectivity, this paper attempts to elaborate how Pai Hsien-yung has managed to exert his translator's subjectivity to make the translation readable, informative and acceptable through a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the translation of *Taipei People* in terms of subjective initiative, passivity and purposefulness.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF TRANSLATOR'S SUBJECTIVITY

The translator can not only give life to the source text, but also decide what kind of life to give and integrate it into target language (Lefevere, 1995, pp.116-119). Translator's subjectivity denotes the subjective initiative revealed in the translator as the subject of translation who aims to serve the purpose of translation in the course of translation activity on the premise of the source text; and translator's subjectivity is characterized by the translator's cultural awareness, character, aesthetic perception and creativity; passivity, subjective initiative and purposefulness (self-benefiting) are dialectically unified in translator's subjectivity (Zha and Tian, 2003, pp.19-24). The translator's subjective initiative is the most important aspect of the translator's subjectivity, which runs through the whole translation activity (Fang, 2011, p.90). However, the exertion of subjective initiative must be based on passivity. To put it simply, translator's choices of the text and translation strategy are restricted

and influenced by ideology, poetics, and patron. Self-benefiting means purposefulness. Skopos theory holds that the skopos rule is the primary principle of translation activity. All the translation activity is determined by its purpose, and the purpose of translation can account for the translator's choice of translation strategy (Nord, 2001, p.27).

3. ANALYSIS OF PAI HSIEN-YUNG'S SELF-TRANSLATION *TAIPEI PEOPLE* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TRANSLATOR'S SUBJECTIVITY

3.1 Passivity as Revealed in the Self-Translation of *Taipei People*

3.1.1 Ideology

Fundamentally speaking, translation, in essence, is the influx of foreign ideology into native ideology. For the native value system, it is a kind of foreign cultural penetration, which may destroy, subvert or challenge local culture (Wang, 2003, pp.16-23). Ideology affects the translator's choice of translation strategy. Facing the conflicts of different ideologies, the translator needs to give full play to his subjectivity and cope with the discourse related to ideology appropriately.

Example (1) 那年秋天，人人都这样说，日本鬼打跑了，阳澄湖的螃蟹也肥了，南京城的菊花也开得分外茂盛起来。(Pai, 2013, p.411)

Self-translation: That autumn after the Japanese devils had been chased out, people all said that the crabs in Yangch'eng Lake suddenly fattened and the chrysanthemums in Nanking City blossomed more luxuriantly than ever. (Pai & Patia, 2013, p.410)

Example (1) is excerpted from *Autumn Reveries* and displays the scene of vitality and serenity after the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. The war remains a very sensitive topic between China and Japan, and Chinese people always engrave in their hearts the sufferings inflicted by the war and turbulence. In the self-translation, “日本鬼” is literally translated into “Japanese devils”. Not only is it consistent to the source text, but also shows China's justified action in upholding peace, the viciousness of Japanese invaders and the brutality of the war to target readers to make them more acceptable. The translator doesn't omit politically sensitive words, nor intentionally uglify the image of Japanese, nor stir up any potential disputes and discomfort probably caused by the war. Meanwhile, it should be noted that Diana Granat once translated one of short novels in *Taipei People --New Year's Eve* where the word “日本鬼” also appears. However, Diana Granat, as a western translator, not taking the specific historical fact and the feelings of target readers into account, put “日本

鬼” into “Japs”. “Japs”, an ethnic slur for Japanese, may cause the readers' displeasure and even misapprehension of Chinese. Obviously, the fact that the self-translator and conventional translator employ diverse translation strategies in the grasp of different ideologies exactly reflects the translator's subjectivity. By contrast, self-translator's subjectivity is more prominent.

3.1.2 Poetics

Poetics is another influential factor in the translation activity which contributes to the translator's passivity. It is essentially a kind of standard determining whether literary works can be canonized and how to produce the translation. Poetics has an influence on whether the heterogeneousness is retained in the translation (Han, 2005, p.105). Considering the dominant poetics in the target culture, the translator removes heterogeneous elements and rewrites the source text by employing linguistic expressions peculiar to target language so as to reproduce the style of the source text and make the target text acceptable to the target readers. The following examples can illustrate this point.

Example (2)

“两个小挨刀的，诶了大姊的鸡汤，居然还吃起大姊的豆腐来！”

“大姊的豆腐自然是留给我们吃的了。” (Pai, 2013, p.127)

Self-translation: “These two gallows-birds! First you cop my chicken broth, now you have the nerve to get fresh with me!”

“Aren't Big Sister's chicken all fresh killed?” (Pai & Patia, 2013, p.12)

Example (2) is the dialogue between Verdancy Chu and young pilots excerpted from *A Touch of Green*. “小挨刀” and “吃豆腐” are typical colloquial Chinese expressions. “小挨刀” is a swear word referring to the prisoner beheaded by the knife in ancient China, and “吃豆腐” means flirt with women in Chinese. If “小挨刀” and “吃豆腐” are literally translated into “the one stabbed by the knife” and “eat bean curd” respectively, such translation will be bound to be incomprehensible to English readers. The translator does his utmost to make the translation faithful to the original and acceptable to readers, flexibly translating “小挨刀” into “gallows-birds” which is an English slang denoting a condemned person executed by hanging as well as putting “吃豆腐” into the slang “get fresh with” which is close in meaning to the original. Slangs are informal expressions and more common in spoken language, they are in accord with the original context and the status of the character. Under the constraints of poetics, the translator is inclined to adopt domestication method to achieve dynamic equivalence, obtain the closest natural equivalent to the source language message and enable the target readers to have a correct understanding.

3.1.3 Patron

Patron, as another component of passivity, mainly limits the translator's choice of the source text. China and the United States established diplomatic relations in 1979 and came to strengthen exchanges in the field of literature. The translation of Chinese literary works started to act as a tool for American people to know more about China. Indiana University Press, once well-known for Sinology studies, drew up a plan to publish a series of English translations of Chinese literary works in the mid-1970s (Song & Wang, 2017, pp.14-20). Pai Hsien-yung, Leo Ou-fan Lee and Lau Joseph who received a doctorate from Indiana University are classmates in the Foreign Language Department of Taiwan University. Lau Joseph has contributed a lot to introducing modern and contemporary Chinese literature, especially Taiwan literature (Li, 2016, pp.42-48). The English translation of *Taipei People* was initially recommended to Indiana University Press by Leo Ou-fan Lee and Lau Joseph. *Taipei People*, as a classic of modern literature, has been widely praised by scholars. Professor Patrick Hanan from Harvard University appraises *Taipei People* as the highest achievement in the contemporary Chinese short stories. *Taipei People* is also deemed as good as James Joyce's *Dubliners* by literary critics. There is no doubt that it is the support of scholars at home and abroad and the sponsorship of Indiana University Press that promote the production and release of the English translation of *Taipei People*.

3.2 Subjective Initiative as Revealed in the Self-Translation of *Taipei People*

Since the translator is the reader, interpreter and rewriter, he possesses subjective initiative (Xia, 2004, pp.89-92). On the basis of the source text, the translator is entitled to choose translation strategies and means of expression which help convey the message as well as reproduce the original form and spirit according to his own understanding, intention, literary quality, target language norms, and aesthetic needs of target readers among other things. Pai Hsien-yung, as the author and translator meanwhile who has a good command of both Chinese and English, attempts to elucidate his works to the fullest and make the translation feature literary and artistic values by employing a variety of strategies.

3.2.1 Transliteration and Transliteration Plus Annotation

The names of most of the minor characters and some major characters without distinctive personalities or hard to translate are transliterated in the translation. Transliteration can make the target readers familiar with the Chinese expressions, playing an important role in the exchange and integration of Chinese and Western cultures. For example, “赖鸣升” and “吴柱国” are transliterated into “Lai Ming-sheng” and “Wu Chu-kuo” respectively. The name of the place and store is

also transliterated. For instance, “苏州”, a city in Jiangsu Province, is transliterated into “Soochow”, and “台儿庄”, the ancient town of Taierchuang in Shandong Province, is transliterated into “Taierchuang”. The restaurant “五香斋” is transliterated into “Wu-hsiang-chai”. The translator retains the heterogeneous elements in the translation to enrich and develop target language by means of transliteration.

The translator also adopts transliteration plus annotation to satisfy the curiosity and expectation of target readers and propel the integration of language into ethnic culture. The historical figure “太真” is transliterated into “T'ai-chen” with an annotation that T'ai-chen, or Yang Kuei-fei, whose romance with T'ang Emperor Ming Huang is the subject of many works of literature. The annotation equips readers with knowledge of Chinese history and literature. Besides, traditional Chinese specialty “花雕” is transliterated into “Hua-tiao” with an annotation that Hua-tiao, literally “Flower Carving”, a very mellow, sophisticated rice wine drunk heated and made in Shaohsing, Chekiang Province. The literal translation of “花雕” provided in the annotation can enrich English expressions and highlight the aesthetic of the name of the rice wine. It also indicates complicated brewing process and mellow taste, stimulating readers' associations and enhancing their understanding of Chinese food. The annotation can acquaint readers with Chinese geography and broaden their horizons. As well, “副官”, a military rank peculiar to the Chinese army in the Republic of China (1912-1949), is transliterated into “Fukuan”. The translator further explains that it is similar to an “aide-de-camp” in the annotation. The translator seeks the equivalent expression in the target language to better transmit the cultural information and help English readers understand the original text.

3.2.2 Literal Translation and Literal Translation Plus Annotation

As one of the prominent features of *Taipei People*, culture-loaded words are the direct reflections of the uniqueness of the Chinese culture. As for the socially culture-loaded words which can be understood in context, the translator employs literal translation. In the first novel entitled *The Eternal Snow Beauty*, “满园花” is literally translated into “Garden Full of Flowers”. According to the context, readers can clearly know that Hsu Chuang-t'u won the poker game and got back all the chips he had lost with the help of Yin Hsueh-yen. The translator retains the metaphor which is refreshing to target readers, makes space for contemplation and arouses readers' interest in reading the text. Additionally, “煞星” is literally translated into “evil star”, referring to the person or thing that brings misfortune or disaster. It is a metaphor for Yin Hsueh-yen, vividly embodying her mystery and charm.

As far as the translation of dish name is concerned, literal translation plus annotation is applied to retain the aesthetic of the dish name and disseminate Chinese food culture. “金银腿” is literally translated into “Gold-and-silver ham”, and the ingredients and cooking methods are introduced in the annotation. It implies the luster of the dish, helps stimulate readers’ association with its appearance and taste and also reflects luxurious life. Another typical Chinese dish “蚂蚁上树” is literally translated into “Ants up a Tree” with a brief introduction provided in the annotation, which is conducive to retaining the uniqueness of the dish name as well as leading readers to create a mental picture of the dish and take interest in Chinese cuisine.

3.2.3 Free Translation

Language selection must be in accord with the context, especially the communicative context which is influenced by the language user, the mind and body of the language user, society where the language user live among other things (Verschueren, 2000, p.75). For some names with profound meanings, the translator adopts free translation that adapts to the communicative context with the social status and image of the character taken into account. In the first short story *The Eternal Snow Beauty*, the protagonist Yin Hsueh-yen, is a popular taxi dancer in Shanghai’s Paramount Ballroom and an extraordinary social butterfly in Taipei. The plot unfolds closely revolving around Yin Hsueh-yen. “尹雪艳” appears 113 times in total in the source text. To avoid monotony and convey connotative meaning, the translator adopts both transliteration and free translation. “尹雪艳” is transliterated into “Yin Hsueh-yen” in terms of the introduction to her appearance, apparel, personality, experience, suitors and house. As the title of the first novel in *Taipei People*, “永远的尹雪艳” is translated into “*The Eternal Snow Beauty*”. The translator ingeniously borrows the image of Snow White which is a well-known character in the European fairy tale. Compared with “Yin Hsueh-yen”, “Snow Beauty” is symbolic and intriguing, easily catching readers’ eyes and giving rise to curiosity. When it comes to the protagonist’s charisma, the translator also replaces “Yin Hsueh-yen” with “Snow Beauty” to shape the image as well as imply the decline of pompous upper class, the vicissitude of the fate and the passage of time. In *The Last Night of Taipan Chin*, Taipan Chin falls in love with a young, shy and ingenuous man called “月如”. The translator translates “月如” into “Moon Boy”, which echoes the plot, symbolizes the purity of the man and beautiful love between them. Apart from that, an opera actress’ stage name is “月月红” in the most celebrated story *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream*. “月月红” is translated into “Red Red Rose” borrowed from the popular poem *A Red Red Rose* written by the famous Scottish poet Burns to perfectly achieve the unity of beauty in sound, sense and form.

3.3 Purposefulness as Revealed in the Self-Translation of *Taipei People*

Purposefulness refers to the purpose of the translator. Skopos theory holds all that the translator does in the translation activity serves his own purpose. Translation itself means producing the target text for the intended readers in the context of the target culture in order to achieve a specific purpose (Nord, 2001, p.85).

Out of the need of better acceptance to western readers and avoidance of misapprehension that this collection of short novels is about local people in Taipei, Pai Hsien-yung chose the most celebrated short novel entitled *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream* as the title of the English translation of *Taipei People* with a subtitle *Tales of Taipei Characters* first published by Indiana University Press in 1982. Later on, for the convenience of bilingual readers in Hong Kong and other regions, the translator and the editor cooperated again to revise the translation. To keep authenticity and irony as well as resonate with target readers, it should be noted that the title of the bilingual edition published by Chinese University of Hong Kong Press in 2000 was reverted to the original title of the book, literally *Taipei People*. The readers of the bilingual version of *Taipei People* are no longer limited to American college students, but should include those who are interested in translation in Hong Kong, Taiwan and other places (Pai, 2013: 29). As can be seen, the purpose of the translator is to carry forward the Chinese culture and provide some insight into translation for English learners and translation lovers. In fact, the purpose of the translator reflects the translator’s attitude towards translation.

The purpose of the translator can also lead the way for producing the translation. By way of Wordsmith Tools 6.0, it is found that the standardized type/token ratio (STTR) in the source text is 24.75, and it is 45.73 in the target text. Obviously, STTR in the source text is much smaller than that in the translation. STTR is directly proportional to lexical richness and diversity (Baker, 2000: 226-251). Therefore, it can be concluded that richer words and more different expressions are added in the translation, which shows Pai Hsien-yung attaches great importance to target language and target readers’ acceptability based on the principle of disseminating Chinese culture to the maximum. Moreover, the total number of the words in the source text and in the translation is 104878 and 75444 respectively, which manifests the translator rethinks and rewrites the original to make the translation more concise and explicit. In the meanwhile, the total number of the paragraphs in the translation decreases by 33 compared with that in the source text, which indicates the translator pulls together some paragraphs to make the translation more compact, coherent and idiomatic. It is the translator’s motivation and purpose that deeply affect the production of the translation.

Though the title of the book is *Taipei People*, all of the characters in the novel are actually people who fled to Taiwan after the collapse of the regime of Kuo Min Tang on the Chinese mainland. They were trapped in identity crisis and survival dilemma, missing their families and hometowns in the mainland as well as clinging to their past glory. The fact that Pai Hsien-yung himself also lived a wandering life when he was young and he witnessed the rise and fall of his family exercises considerable influence over his writing and translation. The experiences of characters in *Taipei People* actually reflect the translator's sense of loss and poignancy. The translator consciously conveys his own feeling and laments the ups and downs as well as changeable life in the translation.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper inquires into Pai Hsien-yung's self-translation of *Taipei People* based on translator's subjectivity. The translation is intelligible, informative and idiomatic. On the one hand, the translator aims to make the translation faithful to the original in terms of the style, tone and content. On the other hand, the translator adopts various translation strategies to convey the meaning as well as facilitate readers' understanding and acceptance. In the whole process of translation, driven by the motivation of translation, the translator gives full play to his subjectivity and pays close attention to target language, target culture, readers' acceptability along with their aesthetic needs despite the restrict of ideology, poetics and patron. As a result, the classic *Taipei People* radiates a new vitality in another language by way of the translator's proficient manipulation of the target language and sophisticated reconstruction of the text.

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