

On Inter-Subjectivity in Translation: The Chinese Poetry Translator Xu Yuanchong as a Case

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Abstract

Inter-subjectivity in translation studies provides a new perspective for studies of translators' subjectivity. The author as the creating subject of the source text, the translator as the translating subject, and the reader as the reception subject, is all involved in the whole process of translation activity. The three subjects should interact with each other and give their inter-subjectivity a full play. A case study of the Chinese scholar Xu Yuanchong's translation of classic Chinese poetry shows that the translator should play the role of a good learner who has to obtain a thorough understanding of the author and the source culture, and also play the role of a qualified teacher who imparts both form and content of the source text to target readers in an easier and more effective way. In a word, inter-subjectivity in translation studies requires cross-cultural understanding and cooperation among the author, the translator and the target reader beyond time and space.

Key words: Inter-subjectivity; Translation studies; Classic Chinese poetry; Xu Yuanchong

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INTRODUCTION

During the past few decades, the issue of subjectivity in translation has aroused heated discussion in the academic circle, as a result of the cultural turn in translation

studies advocated by Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere (1990). Since then, the study focus of translators' status has been transferred from a servant, whose master has been the source text, to a target text producer with a creative and treachery mind (Xu, 2003). In translation studies, much more attention has been drawn onto the role of the translator as the translating subject, from various perspectives such as social, cultural, literary, ideological, and psychological and so on. However, it is also quite essential that translation studies should not go to another extreme. In other words, there should be awareness that translator-centeredness that overstates the role of translator should be avoided. As subjectivity in translation studies is attracting more and more attention from scholars, the issue of inter-subjectivity also begins to be a hot topic in translation studies. As we know, there are 3 main types of subjects involved in the translation process, namely, the author, the translator and the reader. Can all of them be viewed as the subjects of translation? How do the three interact with each other in producing a translated text of high quality? The present article tries to answer the questions, with the well-known Chinese poetry translator Xu Yuanchong as a case study. Poetry translation is generally acknowledged as the hardest form of literary translation, and the exploration of inter-subjectivity in poetry translation will surely have much significance in both theory and practice.

1. THEORETICAL FRAME

1.1 Subject and Subjectivity

To explore inter-subjectivity in translation, the definition of subject and subjectivity should be made clear in the first place. In philosophy, a subject is a being who has a unique consciousness and/or unique personal experiences, or an entity that has a relationship with another entity that exists outside of itself, called an "object". In translation studies during recent years, the translating subject has

been clearly the translator while the text, either the source text or the target text, is the object. Compared with the traditional translation theory, subjectivity of the translator has been far more stressed. The productive Chinese translator Lin Shu is a case in point. As we know, he knew almost nothing about foreign language, but had produced nearly 200 translated books for Chinese readers in cooperation with his interpreters. He had fully exerted his subjectivity in the light of selection of the original, translation purpose, textual form and translation strategies (Yang, 2013). Therefore, studies of subjectivity of translators are quite essential in obtaining a full and objective description of translation practice.

However, some scholars insist that the author, the reader as well as the translator of all fall into the category of the translating subjects, and advocate that the roles of the three parties as translating subjects should be fully discussed. There still exists another view that the translator is the only translating subject, while the author is the creation subject and the reader the reception subject, which are also involved in the whole process of translation. It seems that the latter sounds more convincing, but the study of interrelationship between the author, the translator and the reader, which is the well-known "Davidson's triangulation model" (Zhao & Zhu, 2013), will be worth discussing all the time.

1.2 Inter-Subjectivity in Translation

The author and the reader may not be the direct translating subjects, but like the author both of them are involved in the whole process of producing translated works. The author is the creator of the source text, which has provided the original content and meaning that the translator is to transfer or convey. In this sense, the author is the creation subject of the source text. In creation of the source text, the author must have fully exerted his subjectivity, such as his unique language style, individual understanding of current society, specially designed plots and constructions and so on. Therefore, it is a must for the translator to get a thorough understanding of almost anything related to the author and the source text. If the author is still alive, the translator would have to make a close contact with the author to get every detail of the source text that is helpful to the translation. If the author has already passed away, the translator would have to investigate every piece of work of his and also obtain a proper understanding of the society at the author's time. In one word, the translator should try every means to find out the real meaning, function and style of each word and sentence so that he can correctly convey the original meaning of the source text. A good understanding of the source text is a prerequisite to a good translation task. Consequently, there should be a close cooperation between the author and the translator.

According to the Reception Theory in translation studies, the reader is viewed as the reception subject. From the perspective of sociological translation studies, the whole translation process consists of preparing,

producing and consuming procedures of the translated text. As a consuming or reception subject, the reader's literary tastes, education background will have to be given serious consideration (Cronin, 2012). Therefore, to produce a good translated work requires a careful evaluation on the expected group of readers. Without any doubt, one can never produce a good translated work without good preparation of the target readers. That is why it is so important to fully stress the inter-subjectivity between the translator and the reader.

1.3 Poetry Translation

It is widely accepted that poetry is the hardest type of literature to be translated. Compared with other types of literature such as the novel, short story, essay, drama and etc., far more stress should be laid on the form in poetry translation, since the poetic form may well demonstrate the artistic beauty. At least, form and content should be given equal consideration in poetry translation. In the history of poetry translation studies, the issue of form and content has been heatedly discussed. Now it seems that scholars have reached a consensus that form and content are equally important so that neither of them should be given up for keeping the other. However, the translator has the right to make full use of his subjectivity and increase the readability without damage to the meaning of the source text (Gu, 2008). Considering the big difference between Chinese and English poetry, the translator is expected to keep the balance between content and form and take into full consideration both the poet's intention of creation and target readers' understandability.

2. AN INTRODUCTION TO XU YUANCHONG AND HIS ACHIEVEMENTS IN POETRY TRANSLATION

2.1 Xu's Achievements in Translation of Classical Chinese Poetry

Mr. Xu Yuanchong, the professor and great translator from Peking University of China, is well-known for his extraordinary contribution to literary translation, particularly poetry translation. He has produced more than 120 translated works in Chinese, English and French, and has been praised as the best translator of classic Chinese poetry into English and French. On August 2nd, 2014, he was conferred the "Aurora Borealis" Prize by the Federation of International Translators, one of the highest awards in the international translation field. In classic Chinese poetry translation, he has made exceptionally good achievements. The source texts are all representative Chinese poetry including Book of Songs, Songs of Chu, poetry of different dynasties such as Han, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, Qing, and etc., Man Zedong's poetry and so on. What is more, he has tried to put his translation theory into practice and focus on faithfulness to source texts

and gracefulness to target readers. Therefore, he has been enjoying great popularity at home and abroad.

2.2 Xu's Poetry Translation Theory

Based on a large amount of translation practice for more than sixty years, Xu has developed a unique system of poetry translation theory, which represents the best contribution to the development of modern translation studies of China. Generally speaking, Xu's translation theory can be summarized as an optimum theory which stresses that a translated text should be encouraged to compete with its source text and try to be better than that if possible. Specifically, the optimum theory can be illustrated from three points, namely, ontology, methodology and teleology (Xu, 2006).

For ontology, Xu has put forward the translation principle of three beauties, that is, beauty of the sense, beauty of sound and beauty of form. Beauty of sense is the first and foremost requirement for poetry translation, which means that the translated text should be faithful to the source text in meaning. Beauty of sound is the second most important principle among the three, which require the beautiful transfer of rhythm and rhyme in poetry. Beauty of form comes after the first two principles, which stress the rendering of literary forms such as the length of lines of poems, the number of lines in a stanza and etc..

For methodology, Xu has proposed three methods, namely, intensification, equalization and simplification. In poetry translation, usually the unique allusion and some proper nouns cannot be transferred in a literal translation, and flexible ways should be adopted to focus on the transfer of central meaning considering target readers' acceptability. Specifically, translation will be rendered through the methods of addition, replacement and omission which mostly involve specification, substitution and generalization respectively.

For teleology, Xu has generalized the purpose of poetry translation as understandable, enjoyable and admirable to target readers. He insists that a good translated text should have at least readability for target readers, then be effective in arousing their reading interests, and finally if possible brings about keen enjoyment to them. It is implied that readers' response is the standard to judge whether a translated text is good or bad.

3. A CASE STUDY ON INTER-SUBJECTIVITY IN POETRY TRANSLATION BY XU YUANCHONG

The reason why Xu's translation of classic Chinese poetry has been so successful mainly lies in the fact that Xu has properly dealt with the issue of inter-subjectivity, consciously and unconsciously. There should be a dynamic communication between the author or the poet, the translator and the reader. In this section, inter-

subjectivity will be further discussed based on the analysis of Xu's translation of classic Chinese poetry.

3.1 Between the Author and the Translator: The Translator as a Learner

In translation, the translating subject the translator should be actively interacted with the creative subject the author. Even though the author has been dead, the translator may be able to get a thorough understanding about the author's writing style, purpose and techniques through various ways. In this sense, the translator should be a learner who will have to learn everything related to the author's creation of the source text. As a well-known professor of China, Xu has had a profound knowledge about Chinese philosophy, history, literature, and particularly about the image-centered creation method of the classic Chinese poetry by which the poet's emotion is usually blended with the depiction of scenery. The inter-subjectivity between Xu as a translator and the original poets is well embodied in his deep understanding of the poets and their poems. Take Xu's translation of Wen Tingyun's "Early Departure on Mount Shang" (商山早行) as an example:

商山早行

晨起动征铎，客行悲故乡。
鸡声茅店月，人迹板桥霜。
槲叶落山路，枳花明驿墙。
因思杜陵梦，凫雁满回塘。

Early Departure on Mount Shang

At dawn I rise, with ringing bells my cab goes,
But grieved in thoughts of my home, I feel lost.

As the moon sets over thatched inn, the cock crows;
Footprints are left on the wood bridge paved with frost.

The mountain path is covered with oak leaves,
The post-house bright with blooming orange trees.

The dream of my homeland last night still grieves,
A pool of mallards playing with mild geese. (Xu, 2006, p.46)

This poem vividly describes homesickness and loneliness of a traveller far from his hometown by depicting a picture of a departure in a chilly early morning. It is one of the best representatives of traveling poems which are quite popular in ancient times of China. The poem first presents to readers an image of a horse-drawn carriage which is setting out, and points out the traveller's lonely and nostalgic feeling. Then several other concrete images are listed to describe the scenery at the departure moment, such as "the crowing of the cock" (鸡声), "the thatched inn" (茅店), "the moon" (月), "people's footprints" (人迹), "the wood bridge" (板桥), "the frost" (霜). In the original poem, six images are put together one after another without any conjunctive word, but they are well combined to produce so clear and vivid a picture about the traveler's early departure that readers seem to have felt his strong loneliness, light sadness and the chill of the weather. In translation, Xu knows quite well about the poet's intention and relations among the six images, and skillfully put them in a smooth and logical English sentence. Besides, the leaves of hu trees on the mountain road and flowers of orange trees by the

post-house remind the traveler of the dream last night, which further implies his missing about the homeland. Xu does quite well in stressing the homesick theme of the poem by replacing the hu trees with oak trees, since oak trees will easily arouse people's misses for their hometown in the western world, especially if they are hung with red or yellow ribbons. In this sense, Xu is undoubtedly a good learner of the author and his text.

3.2 Between the Translator and Readers: The Translator as a Teacher

To judge whether a translated work is good or not, largely lies in the readers' evaluation. From readers' perspective, the translator has to take into consideration the readability in terms of theme, cultural elements and form of the poem. Therefore, to achieve this purpose, the translator should act as a good teacher to convey all the information to target readers in flexible ways. If target readers, as students, have difficulties in understanding the unique culture-loaded words, the translator as a teacher should try to use other teaching methods to make the lecture easier. Here is an example to show how Xu Yuanchong translates into English a poem “芙蓉楼送辛渐” written by Wang Changling.

芙蓉楼送辛渐
寒雨连江夜入吴，
平明送客楚山孤。
洛阳亲友如相问，
一片冰心在玉壶。

Farewell to Xin Jian at Lotus Tower

A cold rain dissolved in East Stream invades the night;
At dawn you'll leave the lonely Southern hills in haze.
If my friends in the North should ask if I'm all right,
Tell them I'm free from blame as ice in crystal vase.

(Xu, 2006, p.98)

It is apparent that this is a poem of farewell, one of the popular themes in ancient Chinese poetry. However, it is quite different from the ordinary one, since it does not focus on the description of sentimental emotions at parting but stress his clear conscience. Therefore, the last two lines are the focus of the whole poem. Yet, the last line contains a Chinese cultural element that may sound rather weird in English culture. The poet expresses his innocence and uprightness by using “an ice heart in a jade pot” as a metaphor. In Chinese culture, both ice and jade are used to symbolize purity and uprightness because of their transparency, while in English culture ice will be usually associated with silence or an awkward situation, and jade with wealth or ornament. To bridge the cultural gap, Professor Xu flexibly replaces the jade pot with the crystal vase and adds extra information “I'm free from blame” to explain the implied meaning. The result is that readers can get a better understanding of connotative meanings of this poem. Besides, there are several proper nouns in this poem such as “吴”, “楚山”, “洛阳”. If Xu had translated them literally into “Kingdom Wu”, “Mount Chu” and “Luoyang” without any explanation, target readers would have been very confused. What is more,

poetic language is required to be as concise as possible and extra explanatory information could do nothing but destroys artistic beauty of the translated version. Therefore, at this moment the translator had better adopts the translation technique of domestication and only imparts the central meaning to target readers. In other words, Xu adopts the method of generalization to omit the translation of “吴”, and translate “楚山” and “洛阳” respectively into “Southern hills” and “the North” which only indicates the vague locations. In this sense, the translator should be able to play the role of a qualified teacher so that the hard lecture may be made easier for target students.

CONCLUSION

The author as the creating subject, the translator as the translating subject, the reader as the reception subject, are all involved in the whole process of translation. To some degree the author determines the production of the original meaning and form, the translator controls the transformation of the source text into the target text, and the reader reflects the reception of the translated text. To achieve a better cross-cultural communicative effect, the three subjects should cooperate well with each other and fully exert their inter-subjectivity in translation activities. The translator is expected to be a good mediator between the author and the reader to bridge the gap between the source and the target culture. Specifically, the translator should play the role of a good student who learns from the author about everything related to the source text, and meanwhile play the role of a good teacher who imparts to target readers the source knowledge in an easier way. The professor and translator Xu Yuanchong has set a good example in poetry translation. The cooperation of the author, the translator and the reader, and the fusion of different cultures will surely increase the quality of translated texts.

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