

A Study of the Translator's Subjectivity in Literary Translation—Exemplified by the English Version of *The Border Town*

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Abstract

The traditional view of translator as the “servant” of the author has dominated the translation theory for years, but with the “cultural turn”, the translators' role has been redefined and their subjectivity in literary translation has caught much attention. This article attempts to take the English version of *The Border Town* translated by Gladys Yang as an example to show how the translator demonstrates her literary aesthetics and understandings of art into the translation by adopting different translation strategies.

Keywords

Translator, Subjectivity, Literary Translation, *The Border Town*

1. Introduction

The study of translation becomes more and more important as the world is getting more and more closely connected. For the activity of translating involves persons who actually perform the action, namely, translators, the role of the translator is crucially important. The translator's subjectivity, which is the status influenced by subjective and initiative ideas and personal views, is critical for the translator and translating. Zha Mingjian and Tian Yu argue that the essential characteristics of the translator's subjectivity refer to the translator's “active cultural consciousness”, “human character” and “aesthetic creativeness” [1]. It is reflected not only by the translator's understanding and rendering of the source text, but also by his choice of translation strategy and method.

2. The Concept of Subjectivity and the Views on Translator

2.1. Origin of Subjectivity and Its Enlightenment to Translation

However, attention to the translator's subjectivity did not arise until the end of the 1970s, and later became more intense when Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere have come up with the idea of "the cultural turn" [2] [3], and raised people's awareness of the role of the translator in translating reality. In the past thirty years, various studies have been carried out concerning the subjectivity of the translator, among which were done by Susan Bassnett (1980), Theo Hermans (1985), Andre Lefevere (1992), Tejaswini Niranjana (1992), Lawrence Venuti (1995), and Douglas Robinson (1997). Susan Bassnett, in the Preface of *Translation Studies*, argues that "two contrasting images of the translator emerged" and that translators' role should be emphasized [4]. Asking questions like "who translates", "who is the subject of translation", and "is the translator allowed to be a subject, to have a subjectivity", Douglas Robinson stressed on "the translator's self-hood or individual agency" [5]. The other theorists' discussions generally focused on the visibility of the translator and the relationship of the translator's subjectivity with history, society and culture in the context of post-colonialism and post-structuralism. Chinese scholars, like Yuan Li, Zha Mingjian, Yang Wuneng, Xu Jun, and Duan Feng, also wrote about the topic of translator's subjectivity. Their ideas overlapped each other and did go beyond the scope defined by the foreign scholars. Many graduation thesis also attempted to explore the topic from perspectives of psychology, stylistics and narratology, focusing on specific literary texts, for example *Hai Shang Lei Hua Zhuan* (*The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*), *Lv Hua Shu* (*Mimosa*), and *Fu Sheng Liu Ji* (*Six Chapters of a Floating Life*), or on specific literary writers and translators, Yan Fu, Lin Shu, Hu Shi, Xu Yuanchong etc. Based on the previous studies on the topic of translator's subjectivity, this article attempts to present the traditional view on the translator's roles and reconsider the translator's subjectivity exemplified by *The Border Town* translated by Gladys Yang.

2.2. The Traditional Views on Translators

In order to understand the development of studies on the translator, it is necessary to review the traditional ideas on the roles of translator. On the one hand, for centuries the translator's subjectivity was restricted by traditional translation theory. Before the "cultural turn", translation theory was source-text-dominated. Therefore, the study of translation at that time only focused on the author and the original text. Translated works were considered inferior, "not only second-hand, but also second rate, and hence not worth too much serious attention" [6]. Influenced by such an attitude towards translation, the traditional role of translator was identified as the "servant" of the author, while assessing fidelity to the original text was primary. Pulled between the two poles: fidelity and treason, the translator faced the dilemma of lacking independence and subjectivity.

On the other hand, the idea about translator was also closely related to the

contemporary theory on translating. Traditionally, translating was considered to be the activity of changing the information from one language into another. Traditional theory tended to stress “one-to-one notions of correspondence as well as the possibility of literary/linguistic equivalence” [7]. The fluent translation or domesticating translation strategy had occupied the dominant position for years. The word-for-word translation theory required the translator to be “invisible”, in other words, to translate the original text into an “invisible translated text” [8]. In this case, the translator should follow the rules and standards of translating, ignoring his own subjectivity. Though as one of the major participants in the activity of translating, the translator was put into a secondary status. There were specific terms referring to the translator’s role, for example, “the servant of translation”, “the shackled dancer”, “the translating machine” and etc. [1]. From these terms, it is not difficult to find out the implication for the marginalized cultural status of the translator. In such a theoretical background, the translator was required to play transparent, faithful and domesticated roles in translating activity.

2.3. The Modern Views on Translators

However, the role of the translator and his subjectivity have been renewed and affirmed with the development of translation theory and translating activities. In the transitional years for translation studies, new translation theories were proposed. The most influential ones are Theo Hermans’s manipulation theory, the rewriting theory of Andre Lefevere, and Venuti’s resistance translation theory. The idea that “translating is rewriting” provides a new perspective to study the issue of translation and translator [3]. Early in 1923, Walter Benjamin stressed in his canonical essay “The Task of the Translator” that translation is the “afterlife” and the “continued life of the literary work” [9]. With the rise of “cultural turn”, the concept of translation has been widened and elements capable of being analyzed have become much more numerous. The notions of “patronage”, “poetics” and “ideology” have also become relevant [3]. The study of translation has no longer restricted in “a static and specific text”, but expanded and developed in a cultural context [8]. In addition, focus has shifted from the source-text and context to the target-text and context. The emphasis on the role of the reader in investing texts with meaning has led the translator, a reader of the original work in the first place, and his interpretation of the original work to a more important role. More and more significance has been attached to the role of translators and the historical and social functions of their translating activities. As a result, a translator is no longer viewed merely as a passive receiver but rather “an active participant and a contributor to constructing the meaning of the text” [10]. Therefore, translators in the cultural perspective, not like before, are required to play visible, betrayal and foreignized roles, within which the subjectivity of translators is recognized.

First of all, in the background of modern translation theory, the translator

should become visible, which means that translator should maintain his subjectivity. The translator is emancipated from the “sovereign source text”, that is to say, is set free from the “sovereign author” [11]. The translator becomes the subject of creation. Secondly, no longer “the servant” of the author, the translator is encouraged to “betray” the author, which means that he needs not to follow the will of the author. Though the translator’s activities are still inevitably under the influence of outside factors, he is able to make choice according to his own criteria, principles or motives. Thirdly, the translator is expected to adopt the foreign translation strategy. Modern translation theorists think that translation aims at communicating linguistic and cultural difference of source language text, improving the status of the translator and translation.

3. The Translator’s Subjectivity Exemplified in *The Border Town*

Nevertheless, translation theory and the argument on the translator’s subjectivity cannot stand on its feet if it is not practiced in translating reality. In the history of modern Chinese literature, the masterpiece *Bian Cheng* written by Shen Congwen can’t be denied as one of the most readable and culturally heavy-loaded Chinese novel. This novel was ranked second in the top 100 Chinese novels of the 20th century, only after Lu Xu’s short stories collection *Shout*. It holds a unique position in the history of modern Chinese literature due to its aesthetic beauty in human nature and its unique depicts of the local conditions and customs. Taking place in a small town bordering Sichuan and Hunan in the 1930s, the story mainly demonstrates the love story of Cuicui, a young boat girl. She was raised up by her grandfather after her mother committed suicide because of her pre-marriage pregnancy. When Cuicui grew up and it was the time for her to consider marriage, a rich man’s two son—Tian Bao and Nuo Song—both of them fell in love with her. The two brothers competed in singing to attract the girl according to the traditional local culture. The elder brother Tian Bao, knowing that he was not as good as his younger brother Nuo Song and trying to give precedence to Nuo Song, left the town and died out of the town unfortunately. The younger brother couldn’t bear the news and was disturbed by his brother’s death, so he left the town as well, leaving Cuicui waiting for him with love and hope.

Bian Cheng, a typical Chinese literary text, was invested with regional distinctiveness, which was presented through the beautiful nature, country folk of vitality, peasant aphorism, and interesting local beliefs. The style of *Bian Cheng* was noticed for its folksy tone, pastoral flavor and idealized color. After its publication, *Bian Cheng* was translated into four English versions, respectively done by Shao Xunmei and Emily Hahn, Jin Ti and Bai Ying, Jeffery Kinkley, and Gladys Yang. Though these four versions are all properly translated and have manifested the beauty of Chinese literature and the folksy flavor of its original, Gladys Yang’s version is the most typical one to express the subjectivity of the transla-

tor. And particularly, Gladys Yang has studied Chinese literature in Oxford University for years and lived in China since 1940s with her husband, Yang Xianyi, another leading authority in translating Chinese literature.

3.1. A Brief Introduction of Gladys Yang

Gladys Yang, also named Gladys Taylor, was born in 1919, Beijing, from an English missionary family. In 1937, she was enrolled into Oxford University, first majoring in French literature, then Chinese literature. She came back to China with her husband Yang Xianyi in 1940 and lived here ever since. Gladys Yang made a great contribution to the introduction of Chinese literature to the world by translating large amounts of literary works. The couple has translated a lot of typical Chinese classics. Their best translation works include the well-known *Li Shao*, *Chu Chi*, *The Red Chambers*, and *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* (*Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government*).

Gladys Yang translated the Chinese version of *Bian Cheng* into English in 1981, which was entitled *The Border Town*. Her translation of *The Border Town*, the masterpiece of Shen Congwen in 1934, brought the story onto the stage of worldwide readers. Her translation of *The Border Town*, no doubt, was influenced by her subjectivity. According to Shen Yuzhu, there are four approaches to exert the translator's subjectivity in the translation process: "the choice of the source text", "interpreting the source text", "deciding translation methods" and "expressive ways and translation skills" [12]. Using Gladys Yang's version published by Yilin publishing in 2007, in the following sections, I will discuss the translator's subjectivity by examining Gladys Yang's translating strategy, more specifically, her use of proper stratification, reasonable omission, necessary addition and literary technique [13]. I will use some of the typical examples in the novel to demonstrate how the translator's subjectivity has manifested in translating the original source, in the hope that the analysis will bring a new light into the study of subjectivity.

3.2. Translator Subjectivity Expressions: Proper Stratification

First of all, Gladys Yang achieved concise and target-reader-friendly style by using proper stratification. Description of natural and social scenery is common in fiction, but differs in different cultures and languages. Often, a Chinese writer would like to use many four-character phrases to describe in detail, presenting the reader a vivid picture. On the contrary, an English writer is more intended to use simple and concise words, leaving room for the reader to feel the picture. In order to smooth the language differences, Gladys Yang adopted the strategy of stratification, in other words, making the long and redundant Chinese sentences into simpler and shorter ones. For example, in the third chapter of the fiction, there is a description of the social environment of the small town.

两省接壤处，十余年来主持地方军事的，注重在安辑保守，处置极其得法，并无变事故发生。水陆商务既不至于受战争停顿，也不至于为土匪影

响，一切莫不极有秩序，人民也莫不安分乐生。这些人，除了家中死了牛，翻了船，或发生别的死亡大变，为一种不幸所绊倒，觉得十分伤心外，中国其他地方正在如何不幸挣扎中的情形，似乎就永远不曾为这边城人民所感到。(p. 31)

Gladys Yang translated the paragraph into the following version:

The military commander in this area has succeeded so well in preserving the peace for ten years and more there has been no serious disturbance at the border. Trade by land and water has not been disrupted by fighting or banditry. Order reigns and men live well content with their lot. The loss of a buffalo, the capsizing of a boat or a death in the family will plunge them into sorrow; for the rest, however, they seem quite untouched by the unhappy struggles going on elsewhere in the country. (p. 30)

Here, Gladys arranged the sentence pattern in English to express the same idea but with fewer words. For example, she translated “不至于受战争停顿，也不至于为土匪影响”and“为一种不幸所绊倒，觉得十分伤心外”，into “not been disrupted by fighting or banditry” and “plunge them into sorrow”.

3.3. Translator Subjectivity Expressions: Omission

Besides proper stratification, omission is also adopted to achieve a target-reader-friendly style. Though the translator did not translate some part of the target text, it is still reasonable and justifiable, particularly in the case that the original text contains heavily culture-loaded ideas, where only detailed explanation can help the target reader understand its meaning. *The Border Town* is such a fiction with regional and cultural distinctiveness that it has many culturally heavy-loaded ideas. Therefore, Gladys Yang intentionally omitted some of the sentences in order to avoid reading trouble and uneasiness. For example, there is a passage with an idea of regional gods and local customs.

由于这点不自觉的私心，他把长子取名天保，次子取名雒送。天保佑的在人事上或不免有齟齬处，至于雒神所送来的，照当地习气，人便不能稍加轻视了。雒送美丽得很，茶峒船家人拙于赞扬这种美丽，只知道为他取出一个名为“岳云”。(p. 29)

He had a soft spot in his heart for the younger, giving him the name Nuosong, his brother that of Tianbao. And Nuosong was such a fine-looking boy that the Chatong boatman nicknamed him Yue Yun. (p. 28)

Obviously, Gladys did not translate the sentence underlined on purpose, which would cause confusion for the English reader if it were translated. It needs a lot of explanation to tell what is “天(tian)” and “雒神(nuo shen)” in Chinese idea, what is the logic behind the reason of the father’s fancy for the younger son and so on. Though the sentence was omitted in the English version, it did not disturb the target reader to know the key point in this passage: the father loved Nuosong a little bit more than Tianbao. Therefore, the translator can

choose to omit the underlined sentence and this process displays her subjectivity.

Another good example can be seen in translating the songs in *The Border Town*. Though the Chinese version has the following lines:

你大神，你大仙，排架前来站两边。
关夫子身跨赤兔马，
尉迟公手拿大铁鞭。(p. 87)

The translator, again, did not translate these lines, instead, providing us suspension points. The cultural implication and connotation behind these few lines is rich and the English language cannot maintain it without any further explanation. There are historical stories with “关夫子(guan fu zi)”, “赤兔马(chi tu ma)” and “尉迟公(yu chi gong)”, which are familiar to the Chinese reader but not to the English reader. Gladys could use several passages to explain those terms, but she might risk the charge of explaining not translating. However, to overlook these lines would not have a negative impact on understanding the song. And omission seems to be better than a shoddy work. In this sense, the translator is allowed to and it is reasonable to omit some of the original texts.

3.4. Translator Subjectivity Expressions: Adding

Thirdly, the translator can also display her subjectivity by adding more information when it is necessary. Because of the cultural differences, the hidden ideas between the lines can only be felt by the native speakers, but not by an outsider. Therefore, sometimes it is necessary to add information in order to make the idea complete in the target language. For example,

翠翠说：“全还给他了吗？”
祖父抿着嘴把头摇摇，装成狡猾得意神气笑着，把扎在腰带上留下的那枚单铜子取出，送给翠翠。且说：
“他拿了我们那把烟叶，可以吃到镇筵城。”(p. 63)

Did you give it all back?

He purses his lips and shakes his head with a knowing wink, then extracts from his girdle the ten-cent coin he kept and gives it to her, saying:

“It’s not the gift but the thought that counts! I kept one coin. He got my tobacco, enough to smoke all the way to Zhengan Town.”(p. 62)

In this passage, Gladys emphasized the image of the old boatman as a honest and sincere man with the help of an additional sentence, “it’s not the gift but the thought that counts”, to explain the reason for keeping one coin, which means that he cares more about the good intention than the actual help and it lies in typical Chinese value system.

3.5. Translator Subjectivity Expressions: Removal

Fourth, the translator has his own aesthetic principles, which will influence his choice of words and his preference to maintain what is in the source language

within the target text. In translating the folk songs in *The Border Town*, Gladys was more inclined to maintain the musical rhythm rather than the literary meaning of the songs. Take the following lines for example.

白鸡关出老虎咬人，不咬别人，团总的小姐派第一……大姐戴副金簪子，二姐戴副银钏子，只有我三妹莫得什么戴，耳朵上长年戴条豆芽菜。(p. 85)

The tiger eats the captain's daughter first;
Most girls have gold and silver for their hair;
Poor Emerald is the one who comes off worst---
No trinkets, nothing but bean-sprouts to wear! (p. 84)

Observing into the English version, we can see that the translation did not express the literary meaning, even the idea of “大姐”，“二姐” and “三妹”. However, the lines in the original version were in rhyme and English version succeeded to maintain its musical feature. Another good example can be:

慢慢吃，慢慢喝，
月白风清好过河。
醉时携手同归去，
我当为你再唱歌！(p. 89)

So eat and drink and take your ease,
Then cross the moonlit river in the breeze;
We'll see the drunkards home and think no wrong,
And on the way strike up another song! (p. 88)

In this example, the English version is even better than the Chinese version in rhyming. As Peter Newmark suggests, “where there is a concise symbol, a weird metaphor, a deviant structure, a word that exposes a lexical gap”, the translator may have to “improvise” or “import” or improve, both of which are “creative acts” [13]. Playing the role as a creator, the translator is allowed to make choices according to his own aesthetic principles. The following Chinese idioms and their English translations, in another way, show the translator's subjectivity in adjusting the lexical and semantic substitutions in order to achieve “closeness”, of which the general principle is that “normal or natural social usage must be rendered by its normal, equally frequent equivalent in any text” [14].

车是车路，马是马路，各有各走法。
又要马儿不吃草，又要马儿走得好。(p. 92)

Chess has its rules: the castles and knights have to move in different ways.
I want to eat my cake and have it. (p. 91)

The lexicon and the idea of Xiang Qi (Chinese chess), and ma (horse) have been put into the equivalence of chess and cake, which are literally different but invoke equivalences available for the English reader.

4. Conclusion

Gladys Yang's translation of *The Border Town*, a high quality work, has fully

presented the subjectivity of a translator displayed in translating activities. Her adoption of proper stratification, reasonable omission, necessary addition and literary technique gives us a hint at the translator's role as a creator and translator's role as a creative outcome. This article has adopted some of the examples of her translation with the purpose of inviting more readers to enjoy the aesthetic beauty created by the translator and build up an awareness of the translator's subject roles. I believe that with more cultural awareness and conscious, people will redefine the roles of the translators. Translator is gradually accepted as the subject of translation studies. In this sense, more attention should be paid to translators and their subjectivity.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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