

Retrospect and Prospect of the Study of Translator's Subjectivity in China

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Abstract: At the end of 20th century, influenced by the Cultural Turn of Translation Studies in the West and the discussion about the Chinese translation of *The Red and The Black* in China, the study of translator's subjectivity became one of the main research objects among the Chinese scholars. Creativity and initiative are the original meaning of the translator's subjectivity. Creativity presupposes initiative, and initiative points to creativity. The study of translator's subjectivity is not to justify mistranslations and disorderly translations, but to objectively describe the actual situation of the translator in translation. This paper reviews the theoretic process of the translator's turn, sorts out the representative achievements of the study of translator's subjectivity, analyzes the permission of translator's creativity in Western and Chinese traditional translation thoughts and looks forward to the development trend of the subjectivity research of translators. It is found that the creativity and initiative in limitation are the aesthetic and philosophic features of translator's subjectivity respectively, which will never be altered by time or any thoughts. Besides, the translation itself is the unity of the translator's creativity and initiative, and translator-centered studies of translation history and translation teaching will be the trends of the future study of translator's subjectivity.

Keywords: Translator's Subjectivity, Cultural Turn, Limitation, Creativity, The Translator

1. Introduction

As the subject of translation [1], the translator is an important participant and actual operator of translation activities. It is a pity that the translator was underestimated and the work of translation got severely criticized. The knowledgeable translators were not trusted, and even known as a "traitor" [2]. Since the 1980s, the Cultural Turn in Western translation studies has highlighted the important role of translators in the translation process. The study of the subjectivity of translation has gradually attracted attention [3] and the study of translators has begun to receive some theoretical support [4]. In the mid-1990s, domestic discussions on the Chinese translation of *The Red and The Black* aroused people's academic interest in the subjectivity of translation and the study of translators, and they merged with the translation thoughts of cultural schools from the West, forming the theoretical perspective of translator's

subjectivity research with Chinese characteristics.

The translator's subjectivity is the translator's creativity and initiative in the limitations [5, 1, 4, 3]. The creativity and initiative of the translator in translation are limited by the meaning of the text. The translator must comply with the melody of the original meaning. Descriptive translation studies treat translation as cultural facts, explain translation behavior, analyze translation motivation, and focus on *why* rather than *how* [6]. The descriptive study of the subjectivity of the translator is not intended to excuse mistranslation and disorderly translation, but an objective description of the translator's actual situation in translation. This paper intends to review the theoretic process of the translator's turn, sort out the representative results of the research on the subjectivity of Chinese translators in the past two decades, analyze the affirmation of the translator's creativity in traditional Chinese and Western translation concepts, and look forward to the development trend of the subjectivity research of translators.

2. Research on Translator's Subjectivity: Reviewing and Thinking

As the subject of translation, the translator has undoubtedly a philosophical subjectivity. The research on the subjectivity of translators in China in the past two decades has a multi-dimensional perspective and fruitful results.

2.1. Data Analysis Based on CNKI

The author searched CNKI (2003-2023) using "translator subjectivity" as the key word, and obtained 3209 documents (as of March 20, 2023). From 2003 to 2013, research results showed a rapid upward trend. In 2013, it reached an extreme value of 243 articles and then fluctuated slightly. From 2008 to 2018, the number of articles collected annually has remained above 150. The paper of *On the Subjectivity of the Translator* published by Zha Mingjian and Tian Yu in the first issue of Chinese Translators Journal in 2003 has been cited the most, with a total of 2,908 times, which shows that this article has significant influence.

Statistical data analysis shows that translator's subjectivity has attracted a great deal of academic attention and has become a hot topic in Chinese translation studies in the past two decades. In 2007, Professor Tu Guoyuan from Central South University applied for the Translator's Subject Theory (07BYY010), a general project of the National Social Science Foundation, which was successfully approved and achieved a series of results. The study of translator's subjectivity is not only influenced by the Cultural Turn of Western translation studies, but also the inevitable result of the in-depth development of translation studies in China [12].

2.2. From Cultural Turn to Translator's Stage

In 1972, at the Third International Conference on Applied Linguistics, James S. Holmes delivered a speech entitled *On the Name and Nature of Translation Studies*, which constructed the basic framework of translation studies. The Leuven Conference in 1976, the Tel Aviv Conference in 1978, and the Antwerp Conference in 1980 have deepened people's understanding of descriptive translation. As Polysystem theory and Gideon Toury's translational norms have appeared one after another, translation studies have gradually turned to focus on cultural, social, mainstream poetics, ideological and other factors influencing translation, indicating the beginning of Cultural Turn.

Since 1991, American translation theorist Douglas Robinson has successively published monographs such as *The Translator's Turn* (1991), *What Is Translation* (1997), and *Who Translates* (2001), focusing on translators. The relationship between translation and reader acceptance confirms the translator's creativity. In 1995, French translator Antoine Berman put forward the slogan "to the translator" [3] in his monograph *Toward a Translation Criticism: John Donne*, and the translator's subjective factor was paid attention to. In 1996, Canadian cultural scholar Sherry Simon discussed the issue of female cultural identity in her work

Gender in Translation. "Translation is a carrier for female translators to realize their theoretical and political propositions, and advocates the use of feminist discourse strategies in translation, so that translation activities can provide discourse living space for female translators" [7]. Feminism is in defense of female translators and affirms their subjectivity as translators.

The German functionalist translation theorist Hans J. Vermeer put forward the translation "Skopos-theorie" in his monograph *Grundlegung einer allgemeinen Translationstheorie* (1984), which recognized the translator's decision-making behavior in translation. Since 1992, American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti has successively published *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity and Ideology* (1992) and *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995), *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (1998) and other works, systematically expounded the idea of foreignization translation that made the translation and the translator visible. The Manipulation School believes that translation is the translator's manipulation of the original work [8] and also a rewriting [9], and the translator's task is to liberate the meaning of the original work [10].

In the context of the Cultural Turn of western translation studies, the important role of translators in translation has been highlighted, and they have officially appeared as a specialized research object of translation studies.

2.3. Proposing the Concept and Theoretical Construction

In 1990, Luo Xinzhang used the concept of translator's subjectivity for the first time: "In translation theory, the voice that obliterates the translator's subjectivity should be spoken less, but it is better to study more how to expand the translator's creativity and grasp freedom within limitations" [5]. He regards the subjectivity of the translator as a statement that the translator is faithful to the meaning of the original work and creatively reproduces the original work, which is completely consistent with the actual situation of translation. In 1995, the Translation Research Center of Nanjing University and Wenhui Book Review jointly initiated a discussion on the Chinese translation of *The Red and The Black*, which deepened people's understanding of literary translation and translation criticism. The translation industry has begun to realize that behind the text conversion there are "hidden historical, cultural, social, translation views, translation values and other more profound issues, and all these issues are closely related to the subject of translation... Soon it became a focus in translation theory research" [11].

In 2003, Xu Jun published the article *Creative Treason and the Establishment of Translational Subjectivity* in the Translational Subjectivity Column of the first issue of Chinese Translators Journal, dividing the subjectivity of translation into two types: broad sense and narrow sense. In a broad sense, translational subjectivity includes authors, translators and readers. In a narrow sense, translational subjectivity refers to the translator, and translational subjectivity is defined as "the subjectivity of translation and

the artistic personality self-consciousness embodied in the translation. The core is the aesthetic requirements and Aesthetic creativity” [1]. In the same issue of Chinese Translators Journal, Mu Lei and Shi Yi published *Discovery and Research of Translation Subject: A Critical Review of Translator Studies in China*, studying the subjectivity factors of translators in translation and the cultural status of translators, putting forward six propositions concerning orderly development, theoretical discussion, correct attitude, strengthening cooperation, understanding the world and facing overseas [12].

It is also in this issue of Chinese Translators Journal that Zha Mingjian and Tian Yu published *On the Subjectivity of the Translator*, which defines subjectivity as the unity of initiative and passive from a philosophical level. It is believed that the subjectivity of the translator is “the translator’s subjective initiative displayed in the translation activities for the purpose of translation under the premise of respecting the translation target, and its basic characteristics are the conscious cultural awareness, humanistic character and personality of the translator. Culture, aesthetic creativity” [4]. In the 6th issue of Chinese Translators Journal in the same year, Tu Guoyuan and Zhu Xianlong published the article *The Translator’s Subjectivity: A Hermeneutic Exposition*, which defined the translator’s subjectivity as “the translator is subject to the marginal subject or the external environment and his own perspective. Under the influence and restriction of the target language, in order to meet the cultural needs of the target language, it shows a kind of subjective initiative in translation activities. It has the characteristics of autonomy, initiative, purpose, and creativity” [3].

The question of the subjectivity of the translator is not to abandon fidelity, let alone to encourage mistranslation and irresponsible translation, but to objectively describe the actual situation of the translator in translation. The unmarked, beautiful and smooth translation itself is the perfect embodiment of the translator’s subjectivity. Creativity and subjective initiative are the aesthetic and philosophical essentials of the translator’s subjectivity respectively. The domestic translation researchers’ understanding of the translator’s creativity and initiative, and the western cultural school scholars’ demonstration of the important role of the translator in translation, have jointly promoted the multi-dimensional perspective of the translator’s subjectivity research.

2.4. Translator’s Subjectivity Research from Different Perspectives

Hu Gengshen discussed the leading role and central position of the translator in translation from an ecological perspective [13]. Liu Junping discussed the basic connotation of translator’s subjectivity in philosophy, psychology, literature, and culture from an interdisciplinary perspective, and expanded the subject area of translator’s subjectivity research [14]. As we all know, translation does not happen in a vacuum. The translator’s personal thoughts and social

ideology will affect the construction of the translator’s subjective identity. Hu Anjiang and Zhou Xiaolin believe that the intervention of ideology strengthens the translator’s right to dispose of the original work, and the recognition of rewriting by translation criticism ultimately establishes the translator’s subjective identity or subjectivity [15].

Cao Minglun understood the subjectivity of the translator as the translator’s ability to translate—the ability to analyze and reproduce the original work. Translators must “continuously accumulate their own knowledge and cultivate their own talents” [16] in order to be able to creatively reproduce the original style. Tu Guoyuan and Zhu Xianlong believe that the translators in the early translation of Buddhist scriptures paid more attention to the reader’s acceptance of the translation, and the subject manipulated the object obviously, but later translators tried their best to conform to the text, and the object surpassed the subject [3]. In fact, once translation takes place, the translator’s creativity will inevitably be actively involved in the entire translation process. As the Czech translation theorist Jiri Levý said, translation itself is a decision-making process [17]. The choice of words, structural layout, and cultural choices are all objective reflections of the translator’s subjectivity.

American translator Howard Goldblatt translated a large number of contemporary Chinese novels and made important contributions to Chinese literature going out. His adaptation to the genre of the original work, style, English culture, ideology, reader acceptance and other factors affecting translation reflects the subjectivity of the translator [18]. In order to improve the readability of translations, Howard Goldblatt pays more attention to reproducing the author’s meaning, not necessarily the words and sentences written by the author. With the economic globalization, people’s exchanges in various fields have been continuously strengthened. “Information technology and the subject of translation are closely integrated, and the dependent conditions, expression and realization of the subject of translation are undergoing historic changes [19]”. The new situation of professionalization of translation, artificial intelligence, and translator instrumentalization is currently underway. Translation researchers are expected to re-examine the subject of translation and the subjectivity of translators.

As far as translation studies are concerned, researchers explain everything they see from their respective perspectives. “The paradigm of translation studies is different, and the characterization of the translator’s subjectivity is also different, sometimes even completely opposite [20]”. At the level of translator’s subjectivity, there is a tendency in translation studies that cultural schools and traditional translation ideas are opposite. For example, the traditional translation view denies the creativity of translation and opposes the promotion of the subjectivity of the translator [4]. The author and the original work occupy the central position of the traditional translation view. The translator and readers become the recipients who dare not exceed the border [3]. Traditional translation ideas focus on the translator’s

faithfulness to the original text, thus the translator's autonomy is deprived and reduced to a microphone without subjectivity [21].

However, from the perspective of Chinese and Western translation history, traditional translation views have never lacked affirmation of the translator's creativity. The translator's subjectivity in translation has promoted the historical development of language, culture and nation.

3. Traditional Translation Thoughts and Translator's Subjectivity

Contemporary Chinese translation studies have not only inherited the local self-contained system of translation ideas of "following the original work, faithfulness, Spiritual Resemblance and Sublimation", and have also borrowed and absorbed the research results of Western translation theories, the traditional translation mentioned in the study of translator's subjectivity view must also be intertwined between China and the West.

3.1. Traditional Western Translation View and Translator's Subjectivity

After the Roman military conquered Greece, the translator's subjectivity was brought to the extreme in the process of translating Greek culture. The Roman writer claimed that "translation is also creation, and this kind of creation must be comparable to the original, and the translation must surpass the original" [22]. Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, Cicero, Horatius, Jerome and others all unanimously advocate creative translation. "Since the Middle Ages, Roman translation has been dominant in the translation of western secular texts, and the influence of Roman translators' creative translation still existed until the beginning of the 20th century" [7]. Even in the translation of the Bible under the control of the medieval church, the translator's creativity and initiative never retreated, but the translator's limitations were deeper.

From the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in 476 AD to the beginning of the Renaissance in the 15th century, the Roman Catholic church has been enjoying the supreme authority. For fear of heresy, the medieval church opposed the unauthorized translation of the Bible and required that the believer's understanding of the text must be consistent with God's interpretation of the Bible [2]. From the perspective of modern hermeneutics, neither the Septuagint nor Latin Vulgate Bible can be exactly equivalent to *Old Testament* in Hebrew or *New Testament* in Greek. It must be the product of the fusion of the horizon of the author and the horizon of the Bible. Although the creativity of translating the Bible is limited, the translator is still actively involved in the entire translation process. The translation of the Bible itself is the unity of the translator's creativity and initiative.

With the invention of printing, the dissemination of knowledge was faster and the cost was lower. Moreover, the Renaissance and the religious reform came quietly, and the

translator's subjectivity was released again.

During the Renaissance, the humanist Erasmus emphasized that the translation of the Bible should rely on the translator's language knowledge rather than theological authority. In the middle of the 16th century, the religious reformer Martin Luther believed that translation was interpretation to a certain extent. He claimed that his translation of the Bible was suitable for common people [2]. He also wrote *An Open Letter on Translating* to defend his translation. Luther's creative translation has a profound impact on the cultural transformation of German and the unification of German national consciousness. "Although the written and spoken forms of Neuhochdeutsche were not actually created by Luther, his translation is indeed the driving force, catalyst and measurement standard for the development of the German language" [2].

European countries followed suit, and the Swedish, Danish, and Swedish versions of the Bible were born one after another. Under Luther's influence, William Tyndale translated the Bible into English [2] that illiterate people could understand. In France, Calvin's translation of Institutes of the Christian Religion, Rabelais's *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel* and Amyot's translational version *The live of the Noble Grecians and Romans* of Plutarch together laid the foundation of modern French [2]. The creative translation of the Bible by translators during the Reformation was accompanied by national language, literature and consciousness, which reshaped the cultural feature of European nations and promoted the development of Western civilization.

Eugene A. Nida, an American linguist and translation theorist, is a contemporary western Bible translator who has worked for the American Bible Translation Association for more than half a century. He is also a representative of the linguistic school of translation studies. His Functional Equivalence translation thought fully affirmed the necessity for translators to make appropriate adjustments in culture, language, and rhetoric in order to realize the communicative function of the translation.

It can be seen that the traditional western translation views, including the translation thoughts of the Bible, have never lacked affirmation of the translator's creativity.

3.2. Traditional Chinese Translation View and Translator's Subjectivity

Traditional Chinese translation thought originated from the translation of Buddhist scriptures, and it is also open and tolerant of the translator's creativity in translation.

Although the translation of Buddhist scriptures and the translation of the Bible belong to the translation of religious texts, Buddhism in China has never had the authority of Christianity in the West. Buddhism entered China in the Dong Han and Xi Han dynasties and gradually became localized in China in the fusion and collision with Confucianism and Taoism. During the Three Kingdoms period in China, Zhi Qian's thought that translation should be in accordance with the original purpose rather than text

decoration emphasized the reproduction of the original meaning of the Buddhist scriptures [23]. Similar to the translation of the *Bible*, the translator must actively participate in the entire translation process. The Buddhist scripture translation itself is the objective embodiment of the translator's subjectivity. During the Dong Jin Dynasty, Dao An's idea that the case should be passed on from the original, without causing loss of words, seems to have the meaning of word-to-word correspondence [23]. In order to bridge the differences between Sanskrit and Chinese styles and increase the literary and readability of translations, Kumarajiva asked the translators to keep the original purpose and present Chinese according to the truth. The monk Xuan Zang in Tang Dynasty faced the retrieved scriptures in the Great Wild Goose Pagoda and made the principle of Transliteration in the Five Cases. It can be seen that the translator's creativity and initiative run through the entire Buddhist scripture translation process.

The translation thoughts conceived in the "Great Changes Unseen in Ancient and Modern" at the end of Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China also took goodness and beauty as their criteria. Ma Jianzhong advocated the theory of Good Translation in *Proposal to Establish a Translation Academy* (1894), which maintains that a good translation should make the reader have the feeling the same as reading the original text. It can be seen that the translator's subjectivity has been affirmed. In fact, the idea is similar to the theory Function Equivalent after half a century. With a sense of national anxiety, Yan Fu focuses on translating works that reflect advanced western thoughts, such as Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics and other Essays*, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, etc. In order to win the favor of scholar-official readers, he used the syntax before Han Dynasty for elegance, even adding a lot of personal experience and quotations in the translation. Yan Fu's criteria of Faithfulness, Expressiveness and Elegance in translation in *Evolution and Ethics* (1898) has long become the translation standard for Chinese translators.

In *On Translation* (1932), Lin Yutang believes that beauty is the essential requirement of art. Faithfulness and smoothness are the basic requirements of translation [23]. Fu Lei put forward the theory of Spiritual Resemblance in retranslated version preface of *Le Pere Goriot* (1951): "In terms of effect, translation should be like a painting, and what you want is not in the form but in the spirit" [23]. Lei Fu creatively reproduced the artistic beauty of French literature with a fluency and natural translation. Qian Zhongshu pointed out in *Lin Shu's Translation* (1964) that the translation of a work from one country's script to another country's script can not only show the traces of blunt and far-fetched due to differences in language habits, but also can completely preserve the original, then it can be regarded as Sublimation [23]. If there is no creative talent, the translator will not be competent in literary translation.

Obviously, the subjectivity of the translator runs through all translation processes and does not change due to different historical periods or translation views.

4. Conclusion

The study of the subjectivity of Chinese translators is carried out and deepened under the combined influence of the cultural turn of western translation studies and the Chinese discussion on *The Red and The Black*. Creativity and initiative are the original meaning of the translator's subjectivity. The limitation is to be faithful to the meaning of the original work and the translator is confined to comply with the original meaning. Creativity presupposes initiative, and initiative points to creativity. The creativity of the translator is the aesthetic description of translation, and the initiative is philosophical thinking. The study of translator's subjectivity is not to justify mistranslations and disorderly translations, but to objectively describe the actual situation of the translator in translation. Traditional Chinese and western translation concepts have never lacked affirmation of the translator's subjectivity. The translator's subjectivity runs through all the translation process. The translation itself is the unity of the translator's creativity and initiative.

The study of translator's subjectivity shifts from the translation as the center to the translator-centered theory, which is helpful for the development of the translation history research with the translator as the major part. In 1995, Canadian scholars Jean Delier and Judith Woodsworth edited *Translators through History*. They maintain the translator as the center in translation and argue that the translator plays an important role in the invention of the alphabet, language development, the rise of national literature, knowledge dissemination, cultural dissemination, and religious dissemination from a historical perspective. Liang Qichao, Luo Xinzhang, Yuan Jinxiang, Chen Yugang, Guo Zhuzhang, Xu Jun, Mu Lei, Xie Tianzhen, Liu Junping, Li Yashu, Qin Jianghua and other scholars have all explored the excellent quality of famous translators and tasted the art of classic translations. charm. Their review of the literature and history of the translation is enriching the cultural image of the translator.

How a translator can properly exert his initiative so as to be faithful to the semantics of the original text and how to have the creative talent to reproduce the style of the original work are important questions about how to develop excellent translators. In fact, it is also the fundamental question of translation teaching research. Mu Lei once pointed out that in our original lagging translation research, translation teaching research is even more rare and backward. Not to mention that compared with foreign translation teaching research, translation teaching research in the mainland has a large gap with that of Hong Kong and Taiwan. From the basic concepts, outline formulation, process planning of translation teaching, to specific teaching content, textbook compilation, teaching methods, testing and evaluation, etc., there is a lack of sufficient, systematic, in-depth and empirical research. It is difficult to produce correct guidance and influence on translation teaching [24]. Therefore, carrying out systematic descriptive research on famous translators and their translations, analyzing translation motivations, strategic choices, readers' acceptance and other practical situations

have provided references for translators and will be beneficial to translation teaching research.

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