

The Difference of Chinese and Western Translation Thoughts—in the Cultural Background Perspective

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Abstract: Exploring the traditions of translation in both Chinese and Western contexts unveils the crucial function of translation in overcoming linguistic and cultural divides. It underscores the importance of translation as a dynamic and evolving instrument for facilitating cross-cultural exchange. In this essay, as we delve into the historical foundations of Chinese and Western translation, closely examining symbolic translation concepts and theories that have shaped their evolution, a deep appreciation emerges for the intricate web of ideas that has defined the field. The comparison of thinking patterns between Chinese and Western scholars further illuminates the diverse perspectives that underlie distinct approaches to translation.

Keywords: translation, cultural difference, translation thought, comparison of thinking patterns

1. Introduction

Translation, as a means of bridging the communication gap between different languages and cultures, plays a crucial role in facilitating cross-cultural exchanges and understanding. Both the Chinese and Western translation traditions boast rich and diverse histories, with their origins stemming from various schools of thought and approaches, and thus, serve as an imperative foundation for different translation thoughts..

As Tan Zaixi said: “the development of any translation tradition will inevitably be influenced and constrained by cultural traditions.” In this essay, the writer would delve into the historical roots of Chinese and Western translation, examining symbolic translation concepts and theories that have shaped its development and compare the thinking patterns between Chinese and Western scholars that result in different ideas of translating. Through this analysis, the writer hopes to gain a deeper appreciation for the richness and diversity of translation as a means of facilitating cross-cultural exchange and understanding.

2. History of Chinese and western translation

The roots of Chinese translation can be traced back to ancient times, where the translation of religious texts played a crucial role in the dissemination of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. These translations helped to shape the intellectual and cultural landscape of China, and played a significant role in the development of Chinese philosophy and thought.

During the Tang and Song dynasties, Chinese translation reached its golden era, with classical Chinese works being

translated into various languages, such as Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit. These translations contributed to the global intellectual exchange, facilitating the transmission of knowledge and ideas between China and the rest of the world.

The 20th century witnessed a significant transformation in Chinese translation, influenced by political, social, and linguistic changes. The May Fourth Movement, which aimed to promote modernization and cultural renewal, marked a shift towards vernacular Chinese, impacting translation practices. The use of vernacular Chinese allowed for a wider dissemination of ideas and knowledge, and facilitated the translation of a wider range of texts. The shift towards vernacular Chinese also reflected the changing political and social climate in China, which was characterized by a growing sense of nationalism and a desire to modernize and assert China's cultural identity.

In ancient Greece and Rome, translation was often seen as a means of assimilating knowledge from other cultures, with prominent figures like Cicero and St. Jerome contributing to the early Western translation tradition. During the medieval and Renaissance periods, translation became a tool for transmitting classical knowledge, and the emergence of humanism spurred the translation of classical works into various European languages. The Enlightenment era and subsequent centuries saw an increased focus on linguistic accuracy and faithfulness to the source text, laying the foundation for modern Western translation theories.

3. Comparison between the translation of the Bible and Buddhist scriptures

Even if people live in similar historical periods, different ideologies and religious beliefs can have an impact on their translation thoughts. Ideologies and religions can shape people's worldview, values, and ways of thinking, which in turn can influence their interpretation of texts and their approach to translation. For example, Xuanzang is one of the most authoritative Buddhist scholars in the Tang Dynasty and one of the four great translators of Buddhism in ancient China, he translated 75 scriptures and 1335 volumes during the 19 years from 645 to 664, which was more than the sum of the volumes translated by the other three great translators. Jerome is one of the four leading theologians of the early Western Christian Church.

Both Xuanzang and Jerome aimed to translate the original texts to accurately convey the meaning of the Buddha's or God's true intentions, however, they resorted to different translation strategy. Xuanzang's translation strategy was to rewrite, mainly influenced by his Buddhist religious ideology and the poetry of the Tang Dynasty. Jerome's translation strategy was to use a binary method of translation, having a clear understanding of the correspondence between text types and translation strategies^[1]. In 395 AD, Jerome claimed in his book *De Optimo Genere Interpretandi* that because the word order in the Bible also had a certain meaning, his translation from Greek to Latin was not word-for-word but sense-for-sense, except for the Bible translation.

The paramount authority that confronted Western Bible translators was God, in contrast, the divine entity underpinning Buddhist scriptures, Buddha, differs fundamentally from the Western concept of God. This variance might shed light on the disparity in the demeanor of Chinese translators of Buddhist scriptures, who, unlike their Western counterparts translating the Bible, did not grapple with the same level of anxiety. One plausible explanation lies in the acknowledgment by the translators of Buddhist scriptures that the translation process was a human endeavor, inevitably prone to imperfections.

The contrasting attitudes towards translation between Western Bible translators, epitomized by figures like Jerome, and their Chinese counterparts working on Buddhist scriptures, can be attributed to the differing ontological and theological foundations of the two religious traditions. As a staunch proponent of the idea that the Bible represents the language of God, Jerome advocated for a translation that preserved the divine essence with utmost fidelity. In his view, the Word of God, as encapsulated in the Bible, transcends linguistic nuances and should be rendered into the target language with minimal alterations.

Jerome's unwavering commitment to preserving the sanctity of the source text is reflective of the belief that the Bible's divine nature necessitates a translation that mirrors its original form. The inherent assumption here is that any

deviation from the source risks compromising the sacredness and authority of the text. This perspective aligns with the Western theological understanding of God's divine revelation and the imperative for humans to faithfully transmit this revelation through translation. On the contrary, Chinese translators of Buddhist scriptures seem to have approached their task with a more nuanced understanding of the limitations inherent in human translation. The acknowledgment of the human agency in the translation process allowed for a certain degree of imperfection.

In addition, a striking distinction between the Chinese translation tradition and the approach of figures like Jerome lies in their respective emphases on teamwork. In the Chinese translation tradition, collaboration and teamwork played a pivotal role, particularly evident in the early translations of Buddhist scriptures. This collaborative effort unfolded in a structured manner, progressing through three distinct stages: oral transmission, repeated oral recitation, and finally, written documentation^[2]. This process involved multiple individuals contributing their skills and knowledge, reflecting a communal approach to the translation endeavor. Teams of translators, often composed of twelve individuals, undertook diverse roles, each specializing in a particular aspect of the translation process. This systematic distribution of tasks among team members allowed for a more comprehensive and refined translation outcome.

When examining the Western translation tradition exemplified by Jerome, collaboration was not entirely absent, the dynamics were notably different. Jerome did work with assistants, who were primarily monks and noblewomen. However, his relationship with them was characterized by a distinct hierarchy. Unlike the collaborative and specialized teamwork seen in the Chinese tradition, Jerome viewed his assistants more as linguistic resources or dictionaries rather than active partners in the translation process. They served the purpose of aiding him in understanding the nuances of the source language and selecting appropriate equivalents in the target language.

Jerome's approach to translation, although not completely devoid of collaboration, leaned heavily towards individual expertise. His assistants played a supportive role in providing lexical and linguistic assistance rather than engaging in a collaborative dialogue that characterized the Chinese tradition. This difference in perspective reflects not only diverse cultural attitudes towards collaboration but also varying views on the translator's role within the translation process.

4. Differences of thinking patterns result in varied translation thoughts

The divergence in thinking patterns between Chinese and Western cultures, where the former tends to lean towards abstract thinking while the latter adopts a more rational and concrete approach, manifests itself significantly in the realm of translation.

Chinese thought often gravitates towards the abstract, encompassing concepts and ideas that may not be easily explicated in words. For example, Fulei applied "spirit resemblance" to literary translation and stated that the "spirit" was also very important in translation, "translating, in terms of effectiveness, is like copying paintings."^[3] He saw translating in an artist way. Thus his principle of "spirit resemblance" is talking translating from an aesthetic perspective. He viewed translating as an art. Art is an abstract thing, so it is difficult to measure the degree of "spirit resemblance" in a concrete way.

Another case in point is Yanfu's Three-character Guide, a venerable cornerstone in the field of translation for a century, has earned both acclaim and criticism because the standards of "Xin Da Ya (Faithfulness, Expressiveness, and Elegance)" it advocates are challenging to concretely define. The Chinese character "信 (Faithfulness)" itself carries a multitude of meanings, encompassing beliefs and fidelity. Does it denote faithfulness solely in terms of content or form, or does it encompass both? Does it suggest complete, partial, or flexible faithfulness in the translation process? These intricate questions were not explicitly addressed by Yan Fu in his guide, nor could he have provided exhaustive elaboration.

In contrast, Western translation theory has a more pronounced tendency towards analytical and rational thinking. Taking Tytler's three principles as an example, he asserts that translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work; the style and manner of writing should be of the same character as that of the original; a translation

should have all the ease of the original composition. These principles articulate the relationship between the translated work and the original in terms of content, style, and linguistic expression with clarity and precision. Each overarching principle is further delineated into a set of rules, with Tytler reinforcing his arguments by drawing “quotations from masterpieces of Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, and English”^[4]. Furthermore, influenced by the traditional emphasis on clarity and unambiguity, Tytler felt compelled to address each aspect with meticulous detail and credibility, resulting in his comprehensive exploration of these three principles.

Chinese are likely to think in an abstract way, which can not all be expressed by words. As for the two examples mentioned above, because these theories are too concise and fail to provide clear explanations, they have led to misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the theories by the later generations. While westerners think in a rational and concrete way. Western translation theory emphasizes textual expression characterized by clarity and a resistance to ambiguity. It advocates for justification in all statements, insisting that meaning should be unequivocal.

Conclusion

The exploration of Chinese and Western translation traditions reveals the integral role translation plays in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps and the significance of translation as a dynamic and evolving tool for cross-cultural exchange. As this essay delves into the historical roots of Chinese and Western translation, scrutinizing symbolic translation concepts and theories that have molded their development, a profound appreciation emerges for the intricate tapestry of ideas that have shaped the field, and the comparison of thinking patterns between Chinese and Western scholars illuminates the diverse perspectives that contribute to distinct approaches to translation.

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