

A Study of Chi-Chen Wang's Translation Style

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Abstract

Chi-Chen Wang (1899-2001) is a trailblazer in promoting Chinese literature in the West and is also one of the earliest scholars who introduces modern Chinese literature to the Westerners. This study provides a detailed discussion on Wang's translation style by contrasting Wang's translation with Yang's version. And the textual analysis reveals that Wang's translation style is noted for his use of explicitation on the subtle Chinese language and the adoption of hypotactic syntax that the target readers are more accustomed to. And Wang's lucid and readable translation won a wide readership in the West.

Key words: Chi-Chen Wang; Translation style; Explicitation; Hypotactic syntax

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INTRODUCTION

Chi-Chen Wang (1899-2001) is one of the earliest scholars who introduced Chinese literature to the West. His translations, including modern Chinese literature translations as well as translations of traditional Chinese classics are highly acclaimed by Western readers. He was best known as the first Chinese who translated *Dream of the Red Chamber* in 1929 into English. And most significantly, his translations of short stories of modern Chinese writers such as Lu Xun, Lao She, Ba Jin, Shen

Congwen contributed to the modern Chinese literature researches in the West. Wang published a collection of *Traditional Chinese Tales* (1944), *Contemporary Chinese Stories* (1944) and *Stories of China at War* (1947). From the romantic and supernatural stories which were the favorite themes of Chinese story tellers of the old days to modern writings resulting from Chinese cultural and literary revolution written during the 1930s to 1940s, Wang provided Western readers with extraordinary changes taking place in Chinese literature, as Cameron (1944, p.386) pointed out that "in these volumes Mr. Wang confirms his reputation as a very able translator and interpreter of Chinese literature." Wang's translation won a wide readership thanks to his effort in capturing the original flavor as well as enhancing the readability of the target text. Particularly, Wang is also noted for his readable and lucid translation style. His translation style is impressive in its own way in terms of his use of explicitation on the subtlety in Chinese language and the adoption of hypotactic syntax that the target readers are more accustomed to. This study will provide a detailed textual analysis on his translation style.

1. AN OVERVIEW OF TRANSLATION STYLE

Quite a few translation scholars have attempted to apply various interpretations to the notion of style in translation study, mostly with a view to assessing whether the target text reproduces the style of the original text as expressed in the term "style translation". Its origin can trace back to the illuminating translation principles of Alexander Tytler that the style and manner of writing should be of the same as that of the original. This obsession with the original has found expression in the theoretical elaboration on both the possibility and assessment criteria in translating the style of the original author as found in the work of Nida (1997)

and House (1997). However, it is worth pointing out that the study of the distinctive features of the original author may be extended to the doubt whether the translator can imitate as closely as possible the style of the original without leaving his own marks. "We may well want to question the feasibility of these assumptions, given that it is as impossible to produce a stretch of language in a totally impersonal way as it is to handle an object without leaving one's fingerprints on it." (Baker, 2000, p.244) Baker argues that the style of a translator is the manner of expression that is typical of a translator or the translator's characteristic use of language which differs from that of other translators. Therefore, the style applied in this sense is "a matter of patterning" which involves "preferred or recurring patterns of linguistic behavior" (ibid). While in this study, this subtle line of investigation is not pursued, and it focuses more on Wang's linguistic choice in terms of what might be distinctive about the translation standard he follows, how he achieves certain artistic effects by using specific lexical items or syntactic patterns and his general preferences to settle the conflict between the source and target languages. Within the scope of this study, a comparative study will be carried out by contrasting Wang's translation with versions of other translators to further reveal his translation style. To isolate stylistic features which can reasonably be attributed to the translator from what is simply a reflection of the stylistic features of the original, original writing with sharp and unique literary style by Lu Xun is chosen and the same translation by the well-acknowledged translator Yang Xianyi will be used for comparison.

2. A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS ON WANG'S TRANSLATION STYLE

2.1 Explication of the Original Text

Wang tends to make the original text explicit in his translation, which has become his distinctive translation style. According to Vinay and Darbelnet (1995, p.8), explication in translation is "the process of introducing information into the target language which is present only implicitly in the source language, but which can be derived from the context or the situation". Generally, explication includes addition which refers to the presence of extra items in the target text, which involves a clearer and more accurate and detailed meaning.

The following examples are excerpts from Lu Xun's short story *The Diary of a Madman* with translations made by Wang Chi-Chen and Yang Xianyi respectively. Yang Xianyi's translation of this short story is known for his literal style, so by comparing Wang's and Yang's translations, one can detect Wang's translation style.

(1) 不然，那赵家的狗，何以看我两眼呢？(Kong, 2007, p.7)

Wang: Did not Chao's dog look at me with **malignant** eyes? (1941, p. 206)

Yang: Otherwise why should the Zhao's dog have looked at me twice? (1981b, p.2)

(2) 我插了一句嘴，佃户和大哥便都看我几眼。(Kong, 2007, p.9)

Wang: When I put in a few words **in protest against this savage practice**, both the tenant and my brother gave me a hard look. (1941, p.208)

Yang: When I interrupted, the tenant and my brother both stared at me. (1981b, p.3)

(3) 伸出两个拳头，看他如何下手。(Kong, 2007, p.10)

Wang: **Not wishing to spoil their game for the moment, I gave the old man** my hands, which I had involuntarily tightened into fists, and waited to see what he was going to do. (1941, p.210)

Yang: I held out my two fists to see what he would do. (1981b, p.5)

(4) 我从前单听他讲道理，也糊涂过去；(Kong, 2007, p.11)

Wang: I used to listen to his **high-sounding** discourse **attentively** and to take them **at their face value**; (1941, p.212)

Yang: In the past, I simply listened to his explanations and let it go at that; (1981b, p. 6)

Lu Xun is known for his refined and succinct language in writing. His short stories are stamped with his distinctive, satirical wit conveyed in a concise and lucid depiction. According to Lu Xun himself, he left out some description that was not indispensable, thus making his writings succinct in style but rich in content. "I endeavor to avoid cumbersome writing, and as long as I make myself understood, description serving as a contrast or rambling is unnecessary." (Lu Xun, 2012, p.314) One can see from the comparison above that Yang tried to follow the original writing as closely as possible while Wang made some additions to clarify the obscure writing or to give a more specific meaning. For example, in example 2, Wang added the content of the madman's protest according to the context and translated 我插了一句嘴 into "When I put in a few words in protest against this savage practice" to make the hero's intention clear to the target reader. And in example 4, Wang translated the madman's exhortations to the masses to embrace a whole new life 这只是一条门槛，一个关头 into "It takes but little effort to step over this obstacle that bars the gateway to freedom." Compared with Yang's simple version "They have only this one step to take", Wang's version eliminated the original metaphorical implicitness in case of confusing the target readers. In translation, Wang showed a clear perception of the subtlety of the original text and was inclined to make it specific in his translation. It is precisely this explicit style that makes most of his translations readable and memorable in the West.

2.2 Use of the Hypotactic Syntax

The basic feature of Wang's translation style can be further illustrated by his frequent use of the hypotactic syntax. In terms of grammar and syntax, the original Chinese text is characterized by using paratactic sentence patterns, with each sense groups arranged side by side and each new item simply added to the others. And the elements simply accumulate, with no conjunctions or explicit indication of how they are related. When in translation, Wang was accustomed to transforming them into hypotactic sentences, making explicit their logical dependence or how the items are related by using conjunctions. See examples from Wang's and Yang's translations of Lu Xun's *Zai Jiu Lou Shang* (《在酒楼上》), *Kuang Ren Ri Ji* (《狂人日记》) and *Zhu Fu* (《祝福》).

(1)我从北地向东南旅行, 绕道访了我的家乡, 就到S城。这城离我的故乡不过三十里, 坐了小船, 小半天可到, 我曾在这里的学校里当过一年的教员。(Kong, 2007, p.153)

Wang: After making a visit to my native home during a journey to the southeast, I found myself in the city of S---, where I had once taught school for a year. It was only thirty li from my native village and could be reached in less than half a day by boat. (1941, p.45)

Yang: During my travels from the north to the southeast I made a detour to my home and then went on to S---. This town, only thirty li from my native place, can be reached in less than half a day by a small boat. I had taught for a year in a school here. (1981a, p.20)

See another example:

(2)我还记得大哥教我做论, 无论怎样好人, 翻他几句, 他便打上几个圈;原谅坏人几句, 他便说“翻天妙手, 与众不同”。(Kong, 2007, p.9)

Wang: I still remember how my elder brother, when he was teaching me composition, used to reward me with circles of approval when I criticized the good and to commend me on my cleverness and originality when I spoke a few words for the wicked. (1941, p.209)

Yang: I remember when my elder brother taught me to write compositions, no matter how good a man was, if I produced arguments to the contrary he would mark that passage to show his approval; while if I excused evildoers he would say, "Good for you, that shows originality." (1981a, p.4)

(3)于是算清了工钱, 一共一千七百五十文, 她全存在主人家, 一文也还没有用, 便都交给她的婆婆。那女人又取了衣服, 道过谢, 出去了。其时已经是正午。(Kong, 2007, p.143)

Wang: Therefore, her wages, which amounted to 1750 *cash* and of which she had not spent a penny, were handed over to the mother-in-law. The woman took Sister Hsiang-lin's clothes, expressed her thanks, and went away. (1941: p.193)

Yang: Thereupon her wages were reckoned up. They came to 1750 *cash*, all of which she had left in the keeping of her mistress without spending any of it. My aunt gave the entire sum

to Xianglin's mother, who took her daughter-in-law's clothes as well, expressed her thanks, and left. (1981a, p.8)

The textual structure of the original text is loose without cohesive markers but displays a reasonable level of thematic continuity mainly from contextual coherence. The hypotactic constructions with relatively small number of conjunctions render the interpretation of the text largely rely on the readers' ability to infer relationships between sentences. Following a typical way of narration in the Chinese language, Lu Xun put several semantically related clauses together, without distinguishing their temporal or spatial order. By contrast, "English generally refers to present information in relatively small chunks and to signal the relationship between these chunks in unambiguous ways, using a wide variety of conjunctions to mark semantic relations clause, sentences and paragraphs." (Baker, 2011, pp. 201-202) Wang was readily aware of the conflict between the two languages and was thus different from following a close verbal correspondence as Yang did. Wang's translation shows his good command of both the source and target languages. He rearranges the sentence order and combines the relative semantic groups together to achieve cohesion in the target text. We can notice that Wang presents a lucid and clear translation by changing the order of clauses to maintain the emphasized information in original text, as displayed in the above examples. In contrast, Yang's version follows the original syntax, which demonstrates different stylistic preferences of the translators.

3. RECEPTION OF WANG'S TRANSLATION

Wang's effort in making works loaded with heavy Chinese elements both understandable and readable to Western readers is well acknowledged. Doren (1958, p. i) talked about the risks the translator might take since "at one extreme there was the danger of a literalness that would yield only fantastic results, and at the opposite extreme there was the danger of a freedom that would rob the classic of its ancient flavor," but he expressed his admiration for Wang's translation style, saying that "Mr. Wang's solution appears in his admirable style, which is colloquial as that of the original is colloquial, and which does not hesitate to employ modern terms in the faith that their equivalents existed in the matchless novel of manners he translates." (ibid)

George Kao (1942, p.280) shows his appreciation by saying that Wang brings Chinese literature to Western readers "as if the language barrier does not exist." He speaks highly of Wang's excellent job in delivering the spirit of the original writing, saying that Wang's *Ah Q and Others* keeps "the same sparing and deadly effective prose of the original", and "becomes more than translation but a

collaborative job, itself in part creative,” and he recognizes that Wang is “totally en rapport with the author.” (Kao, 1942, p.281) And Hsiao Chi'en (1941, p.562), after reading through *Ah Q and Others*, complements Wang on his translation skills and considers him as a “competent and painstaking translator.” “In comparing his translation with the original, I was amazed at his achievement.” And he also points out that Wang should be thanked for his “avoiding of the exploitation of the ideographical nature of the Chinese language.” Clyde (1947, p.468) also concludes that “Wang has again demonstrated his capacity as a translator. The stories appear in excellent English, yet the flavor of their Chinese origin has been preserved in considerable measure.”

CONCLUSION

Wang is noted for his readable and lucid translation style, which is impressive in its own way in terms of explicitation on the subtlety in the Chinese language and the adoption of hypotactic syntax that the target readers are more accustomed to. The employment of flexible addition and specification as well as appropriate cohesive markers combines to create a concise and coherent style of translation. His continuous efforts to identify with the author and the excellent translation justify his reputation as a competent and talented translator. Wang's translations in his most productive years center on socially conscious type of writing, which bear a close relationship--both in themes and in technique--to his sympathy and expectation for China. All the original stories were created between the late 1910s and 1930s, spanning a period when China was going through dramatic social and ideological transformation. Wang aimed to reveal the true image of China to the West. As one of the earliest scholars who made some modern Chinese writers known to the Westerners, Wang was in many ways the founding father of modern Chinese literature translation in the West.

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