

Original Paper

The Comparative Study on the Two English Versions of *Three-Character Classic* in the Light of Skopos Theory

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Abstract

Throughout the history, more and more great Chinese classics have been translated into English, which has attracted a large number of readers in the West. Three-Character Classic is one of the most well-known Chinese classic, cultivating billions of Chinese as a canon and greatly affecting the Chinese culture. Many translators are devoted to translating it into English. Among those translations, the most famous two versions are Herbert Giles's and Zhao Yanchun's. Since translation is a subjective activity, the two translators employ different translation approaches, thus producing different translations. This thesis exemplifies these two English representative versions, comparing several aspects in detail, such as diction, syntax, rhetorical device and cultural element in the light of the three principles of Skopos theory. Herbert Giles aims at inspiring foreigners to learn Chinese culture, while Zhao Yanchun intends to promote the beauty of Chinese classics. Zhao Yanchun reproduces the content and makes several creative modifications to preserve the charm of the original text. Through a contrastive study, the author concludes that: the translators' different translation purposes decide their adoption of different translation strategies. Meanwhile, the difference in cultural and social background also exert certain effects on their translation. In light of Skopos theory, the English versions of both Zhao Yanchun and Herbert Giles achieve their purposes of translating, justifying the applicability of Skopos theory in the translation of Chinese classic.

Keywords

Skopos theory, Three-character Classic, Comparative Study

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to Skopos Theory

In the 1970s, Skopos theory originated in Germany. It was proposed by a Germany scholar, Hans J. Vermeer. In 1978, he published a book called *A Framework for a General Theory of Translation*

where he first states the basic principles and rules. He believes that translation is a sub-sphere of the communications between cultures and that in some specific cases the purpose of the translations are different from that of the source texts. Therefore, translators should consider the specific purposes of the translations. They are required to be more active to take the lead in translating (Reiss Katharina, Vermeer Hans J., 2014, pp. 33-43). There are three principles in Skopos Theory of Translation: the rules of Skopos, coherence and fidelity.

“Skopos rule” is predominant among these rules. Vermeer explained “Skopos” as “each text is produced for a given purpose and should serve this purpose” (Reiss Katharina, Vermeer Hans J., 2014, p. 50). He thinks that translation was a cross-cultural activity and the translator must deeply study the cultural and social backgrounds (Reiss Katharina, Vermeer Hans J., 2014, p. 90). Besides, he regarded that the translation was more like a form of action, or “a cross-cultural event” (Reiss Katharina, Vermeer Hans J., 2014, p. 92). So in order to fulfill a translation task, one must consider the purpose of translation. This rule requires that a translation must follow some principle that is decided in a specific situation. In this sense, translators are bound to adopt different translation strategies to fulfill their purposes in translation.

Coherence rule is often referred to as intra-textual coherence. It requires that translated text should be comprehended and accepted by the target receivers, considering their knowledge level, understanding ability and cultural difference. Besides, according to this rule, the final translation must be coherent with the norms in the target language, making it acceptable to the intended readers (Reiss Katharina, Vermeer Hans J., 2014, p. 98). Under the guidance of this rule, the source text is not the only source of the information provided for translators. They can decide on which part is meaningful and acceptable in the light of target readers.

The fidelity rule is also presented as inter-textual coherence. Christiane Nord held that a translation should bear some relationship with the corresponding source text (Nord, Christiane, 2014, p. 56). Thus, according to this rule, the translator should consider the source text’s meaning and style and preserve it as much as possible. This principle resembles the “equivalence principle” in some sense, but we can’t equate the two principles because what the translated work is created for and how the target reader perceive the translation are the two major factors of deciding the degree of fidelity.

Although coherence rule and fidelity rule are subject to Skopos rule, it doesn’t mean that translators could abuse their power to willfully change the content and meaning of the source text. On the contrary, these three principles must function together to create an ideal translation.

1.2 Introduction to Three-character Classic

Three-character Classic is the enlightened reading material of the Chinese people. It is characterized by succinct words and antithesis, conveying profound meaning. Therefore, it’s difficult to perfectly translate it, which needs translators to strike a balance between conveying the original meaning and preserving the original flavor. The translation of Three-character classic generally has been through three periods: prosperity (1812-1900), quietness (1901-1988) and renaissance (1989-2015) (Zhao, 2015,

p. 132). Herbert Giles (1845-1935) was in the period of prosperity, while Zhao Yanchun (1962-) is in the Renaissance period (Zhao, 2015, pp. 133-134).

In the prosperity period, China adopted a closed-door policy, restricting the communication between Chinese and western world. However, due to the rapid development of capitalism, capitalist countries hoped that China would open its market. At the same time, these countries were keen on studying Chinese culture to get a better understanding of China. In this period, lots of translators were engaged in the translation of Three-character Classic, such as Robert Morrison (1782-1834), Coleman Bridgman Elijah (1801-1861) and Herbert Allen Giles (1845-1935). Among those translators missionaries accounted for nearly half of the translators. The original reason for these missionaries to translate Chinese reading materials such as *Three-character Classic* is to facilitate foreigners to learn Chinese and reveal the ethical and moral connotation of these reading materials (Zheng, 2016, pp. 126-133).

In the quietness period (1901-1988), foreigners had had basic understanding of China. What's more, through James Legge and Giles' translation of Chinese classics, Westerners could have a deeper understanding of China. Therefore, Three-character Classic, as simple and enlightened material, was no more popular among translators. There were only three known translations, and all of them didn't gain success.

Renaissance period is related to the policy of China. After the reform and opening up in the 1980s, there was a trend called "culture fever" in the mainland. An upsurge of rereading traditional books in Chinese mainland was set off. Sinology classics have been reprinted one after another, and folk activities such as reading classics have been carried out. During this period, there were 21 kinds of translation (Zheng, 2016, pp. 126-133). Most of the translators in this period were Chinese. They had strong awareness of translating China's culture into China and making China's traditional culture go global.

2. The Purposes of the Translators

Having analyzed the development stages of the translation of *Three-character Classic*, it is easier to study the purposes of the two translators: Zhao Yanchun and Herbert Giles.

Zhao Yanchun, a professor of Tianjing Foreign Language University, is devoted to the translation of Chinese poems and classics. In 2005, he published *On Translation: Of Chinese Poems*. In this book, he studied the way to deliver elegant translations of Chinese poems, such as *Song Of The Great Wind, and A Short-Song Ballad*. Zhao translates *Three-character Classic* to promote the beauty of Chinese poems too. When talking about the intention of translating the *Three-Character Classic*, Zhao Yanchun said: "it's a responsibility to let Chinese culture" go out "and let more people understand the Three Character Classic and the profound Chinese culture" (Li, 2015, pp. 41-45). He has his own views on "going out" of Chinese culture. In translation practice, he has always adhered to and practiced the principle of "translating poetry by poetry and translating classics by classics" (Li, 2015, pp. 41-45). He advocated that the excellent traditional Chinese culture should be promoted to the international stage so that other

countries and regions in the world can appreciate and learn from each other. At the same time, he advocated that all kinds of excellent cultures should be interconnected to achieve their own in-depth development (Li, 2015, p. 44).

Herbert Giles is a scholar of Chinese literature and culture. Through his career of translating, he had translated a lot of Chinese literary works, including *Syn-optical Studies in Chinese Character*, *Handbook of the Swatow Dialect*, *The Hundred Best Characters*, *Two Chinese Poems*, and *A Thousand-Character Essay for Girls*. By these translations, he was committed to spreading Chinese history and culture to foreigners. The main purpose of his translation of *Three-character Classic* is not to translate, but is to help foreigners learn Chinese. He once said: "I translate these two works in the hope that those who are interested in China's past, present and future but are not familiar with its language can understand them. These two works are the foundation of China's education" (Li, 2014, pp. 26-27). From this perspective, his translation is more like a text book for the learning of Chinese culture.

Both versions gain popularity among different readers. In the next chapter, the author will select some detailed examples to study the two versions in light of Skopos theory.

3. A Contrastive Study from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

3.1 Contrastive Study from Skopos Rule

The purpose (skopos) of the overall translational action is the prime principle determining the translation process. Translators are supposed to determine his translation purpose before translating. In order to fulfill their purpose, the choose of metrical pattern is of great significance. The original text, as classics, should not only have profound meaning but also have musical tones to make the reading for children more smooth. The following part mainly focuses on the analysis of the rhyme in these two versions from skopos rule.

Example 1:

Original text: 玉不琢, 不成器。人不学, 不知义。

Herbert Giles: *If jade is not polished, it cannot be a thing of use. If a man does not learn, he cannot know his duty towards his neighbor.*

Zhao Yanchun: *No jade crude, Shows craft good. Unless you learn, Brute you'll turn.*

(Zhao, 2014, pp. 38-40)

Taking the example above for instance, the first sentence and the second sentence share the same end sound. ("crude" rhymes with "good") So do the third sentence and the fourth sentence. ("learn" rhymes with "turn"). Actually, in Zhao's translation, each sentence has steady, regular rhymes, namely the pattern of "AABB". He achieve this by reproducing the information in the source text. For example, "不琢" literally means "is not polished", while he creatively translate it into "no jade crude". He replace the verb "polish" with an adjective "crude". "知义" literally means "understand proper manners or the truth" (Lu, 2010, pp. 16-17), while Zhao translate it into "turn brute", replacing the verb

“understand” with an adjective “brute”. As for Herbert’s translation, it doesn’t have any rhymes but offers detailed explanations of the source text.

In the view of Skopos theory, the source text is just an aspect of information, and the translator is allowed to make some necessary modifications to achieve his purposes. Zhao’s main purpose is to arouse readers’ interest, so he is clearly successful in this sense. Herbert’s skopos is to convey the original information in the source text as much as possible, so he doesn’t adopt rhyme-scheme translation as Zhao. He gives priority to conveying the original meaning, at the cost of musicality and rhyme, making it less elegant and desirable. So from this perspective, Zhao’s version is better.

3.2 Contrastive Study from Coherence Rule

Coherence rule requires that the target text should be understood by the target receivers. Syntax plays an essential role in the understanding of readers. It refers to a set of rules in a language and the way of arranging words and phrases to form sentences. English generally possesses a more rigorous sentence structure than Chinese. Clause is typical of long sentence pattern in English. While Chinese, especially Chinese classics, are typical of loose sentences, abbreviated sentences, and ellipsis sentences. Considering the difference between the two languages, the two translators adopt different strategies. The following part mainly analyses of the two versions from the perspective of sentence pattern.

Example 2:

The original text: 苟不教，性乃迁。教之道，贵以专。

Herbert Giles: *The right way in teaching, is to attach the utmost importance to thoroughness.*

Zhao Yanchun: *To teach well, you deeply dwell.*

(Zhao, 2014, pp. 9-11)

In this sentence, Herbert uses a infinite phrase “*to attach the utmost importance to thoroughness*” as a the object, which makes the sentence wordy. Besides, the phrase “attach importance to...” is not succinct. In this sentence, there are 13 words and two punctuation marks. In comparison, Zhao uses three words in every clause, which is the same number as the source text. So Zhao’s translation is more readable and succinct than the Herbert’s. Based on coherence rule, the text is meaningful only if it is understood by the target readers.. As the source text is the enlightened reading material for children, the translation should be as clear and vivid as much as possible. Thus, I think both Zhao’s translation is better.

3.3 Contrastive Study from Fidelity Rule

Under the guidance of fidelity rule, the translator should preserve the source text’s meaning and style as much as possible. Rhetorical devices are common in literature and can reflect the style of the source text. English and Chinese both like to use various rhetorical devices to strengthen the interest and charm of words. In most cases, rhetorical devices can be translated equivalently between two languages. Cultural elements also frequently appear in children’s literature. Due to different cultural background, it is a complicated task to translate cultural elements in Chinese classics. Translators should be flexible according to the fidelity rule in Skopos theory. This part will mainly discuss the translation of rhetorical

devices and culture-related expressions in Three-character Classic in light of fidelity rule.

3.3.1 Metaphor

Metaphor is a figure of speech describing something by comparing it to something else. It is ubiquitous in literary works, folk songs and news reports to make words more powerful and convincing. By using metaphors, they can depict some abstract things with something tangible to readers.

Example 3:

Original text: 玉不琢，不成器。

Herbert Giles: *If jade is not polished, it cannot be a thing of use.*

Zhao Yanchun: *No jade crude, Shows craft good.*

(Zhao, 2014, pp. 38-40)

The metaphors in this example will be compared in light of fidelity rule. The first metaphor “玉” vividly compares a person to jade, which is white and graceful at the beginning. To reproduce this effect, both translators stick to the fidelity rule by keeping the original image in the source text. “器” is also an excellent example of metaphor in specifying a person, which can be shaped as it develops. In terms of fidelity rule, “craft” keeps the original image of the source text, while “thing of use” has a little difference from the original image. In comparison, “craft” is more vivid, indicating that a person can be changed by his own hand, just like a craft. In light of fidelity rule, the degree of similarity between the source text and the target text depends on the translator’s understanding of the original text and her or his mastery of words. In this example, Zhao excels Herbert in these two aspects.

3.3.2 Cultural Elements

Chinese Classics inevitably contains lots of culture-related words. Considering different cultural and social background, in most cases, it’s impossible to translate them word for word. However, the general meaning of these words have certain similarities, which makes it possible for translators to preserve part of the images of the source text. Here are some examples of cultural elements.

Example 4:

Original text: 曰仁义，礼智信。此五常，不容紊。

Herbert Giles: *We speak of charity of heart and of duty towards one's neighbour, of propriety, of wisdom, and of truth. These five virtues admit of no compromise.*

Zhao Yanchun: *Grace, justice, courtesy, Wisdom, and fidelity. Good order derive, From Constants Five.*

(Zhao, 2014, pp. 73-74)

“仁” is a core concept in Confucianism, while Confucius didn’t give a certain definition and detailed explanation of it. Actually, this concept has several aspects of meaning: respect and help each other, kindness, and so on. So Herbert only covers one aspect of “仁” by translating it into “charity of heart”. Due to culture difference, it is difficult for Herbert to have a profound understanding of some Chinese cultural elements. In comparison, Zhao translate “仁” as “grace”, which means “behave in a pleasant, polite, and dignified way” in *Collins English Dictionary*. The meaning of “pleasant and dignified” are

vague and have some difference from the original text. We can see that sometimes Zhao sacrifices fidelity to chase readability.

The definition of “义” is not fixed, but it is always related to morality and requires a man to obey moral rules in his/her life (Cao, 2017, pp. 14-16). In this sense, Herbert’s translation—“duty towards one’s neighbour” has much difference from the original text. While Zhao basically convey the meaning of “义”.

The word “礼” has two aspects of meaning: the rule of a country and social order (Tu, 2020, pp. 137-148), “courtesy” and “propriety” respectively means “polite behaviour that shows respect for other people” and “moral and social behaviour that is considered to be correct and acceptable” in *Collins English Dictionary*. In comparison, Herbert’s translation is more accurate because it contains the meaning of social order.

“信” refers to the virtue of a man, while “truth” means the true facts about sth. So clearly Herbert’s translation is not appropriate. Zhao does a better job by the use of “fidelity”, which means “being loyal to somebody, or something”.

Finally, in the translation of “常”, Zhao preserves the original image by using “constants”. While Herbert adopts free translation method and translates it into “virtues”, “constants” means “a thing or value that always stays the same” in *Collins English Dictionary*. It indicates that the five virtues are unchanged values in traditional Chinese culture, while Herbert omits this aspect of meaning.

In conclusion, due to different cultural backgrounds, Herbert lacks of a deep understanding of Chinese culture. So sometimes he can only convey the literal meaning of some culture elements, which is not in accordance with the fidelity rule. Zhao, in the hope of keeping readability, fails to translate some culture-related words accurately with concise words. Thus, from the perspective of fidelity rule, both of their translations have their merits and flaws.

4. Conclusion

Skopos theory figures a unique way out of traditional translation theories, such as “functional equivalence”. It justifies the existence of different versions, which are produced in dissimilar ways based on translators’ purposes.

In this thesis, the author compared the two English versions of *Three-character classic* from three main rules of Skopos theory.

From the perspective of skopos rule, Zhao and Herbert clearly adopt different methods to achieve their different purposes. Zhao uses musical expressions to realize his purpose of conveying the elegance of Chinese poems, while Giles focuses on offering more necessary information and detailed explanations to help foreigners understand Chinese culture.

From the perspective of coherence rule, the translated text should be comprehended and accepted by the target receivers. This principle is adopted by the two translators in sentence translation. Zhao chooses to break the long sentences into short parts in order to be succinct. Besides, he creatively

changes the sentence pattern of the source text, and successfully attracts readers' interest. On the contrary, Giles favors detailed explanation in his translation. He retains the original structure and information, sacrificing the conciseness of the source text.

From the perspective of fidelity rule, the translation should have certain relationship with the source text. This rule is effective in translating rhetorical devices and cultural elements. On the translation of rhetorical devices, because Zhao has a better understanding of the original text and a better mastery of words, he renders a better translation than Giles. On the translation of cultural elements, Zhao strives to retain the beauty of Chinese culture, while Giles adopts wit and creative changes to help foreign readers understand Chinese culture by sacrificing some Chinese cultural elements. The later aims to encourage readers to be more interested in colorful Chinese cultures.

Because the two translators aim at different target readers from different social backgrounds, they certainly produce different versions. There are also other factors will influence the difference in translation. First, we should also think about the difference in social and cultural background. Zhao's version was produced in 2011, and Herbert's version was created in 1899. This temporal difference is indicated in their translation. Second, a translator should also pay enough attention to the original style of the source text and endeavor to reproduce it in his or her translation. Zhao's version is characterized by vividness, simplicity, and conciseness. Herbert's translation is detailed, plain and rigid. In this sense, Zhao's consideration of the style of the source text makes his version more popular among readers. In conclusion, these two different translations serve for different purposes. Skopos theory gets rid of the restrictions of traditional translation theories, and embraces the existence of various versions. According to this theory, the target reader has dominating importance. In Chinese classic translation, the readership has a wide range. Therefore, in light of Skopos theory, translators could decide their own unique translation strategies to meet their different target readers' demands.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

Firstly, there is no flawless translation theory, and Skopos theory is not an exception. Although its applicability to Chinese classic translation speaks for itself, the theory still has its own drawbacks. Criticisms conclude that Skopos theory only assures the target text's form. What's more, it fails to offer a specific translation method, but gives the translator great freedom to determine their translation strategies. In other words, it enhances the translator's right to choose how he translates a text.

Secondly, this thesis selects *Three-character Classic* as an example, which could only cover one genre of Chinese classics. There still remain lots of other sorts of Chinese classics to be probed into and many other relevant aspects to be touched upon. Furthermore, due to the writer's limited time and resources, the collected examples and the analysis of the two English versions are far from enough. If time and energy permitted, the author is willing to give more examples to make the comparison more thorough, persuasive. Additionally, as for the examples in this thesis, they are inevitably influenced by the author's subjectivity, thus making this study less scientific.

Although classic translation has a long history, there are still no settled rules to abide by in classic translation. The author sincerely expects that there will be more scholars and students devoting themselves to this field, more relevant seminars held in universities for people who are interested to participate in. As for the translators, I suggest that while translating Chinese classics, translators should take the target readers into consideration. They should be flexible in reproducing the form and the content of the original text.

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