

Original Paper

A Study on Sondergard's Translation from the Perspective of Narratology

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Abstract

Chinese classical novels have great influence and high literary value. Sinologist Sidney L. Sondergard's relatively new complete translation have received little attention and research. Combining narrative theories, this paper takes the translation of Sondergard as the core and uses other translation versions of the same work as a reference to analyze the inspiration of Sondergard's translation for Chinese classic books.

Keywords

English translation, Sondergard, classic books

1. Introduction

At present, there are relatively few studies on the English translation of *Liaozhaizhiyi*. Under the category of Chinese classic books, comparing with similar novels, as well as traditional writings such as *Lunyu* and *Daodejing*, the English translation studies of *Liaozhaizhiyi* are far less in quantity.

The paucity of studies of *Liaozhaizhiyi* in English translation may be related to its longstanding failure to have a full English translation. As early as 1835, there was in the Western world a short solo translation of "*Baiyuyu*" (《白于玉》, one of the stories in *Liaozhaizhiyi*), probably by British sinologist John Francis Davis. In 1880, British sinologist Herbert A. Giles translated and published the first abridged English translation of *Liaozhaizhiyi*. And it was not until 2014, which was more than a hundred years later, that American sinologist Sidney L. Sondergard has made the first full English translation of *Liaozhaizhiyi*.

At the same time, the literary achievements of *Liaozhaizhiyi* are often overlooked in its translations. This paper combines the narratological perspective with Sondergard's translation strategies and ideas to explore the strengths and shortcomings of Sondergard's version.

2. Introduction to *Liaozhaizhiyi* and Its Translations

2.1 Introduction to *Liaozhaizhiyi*

Liaozhaizhiyi (《聊斋志异》), often abbreviated to *Liaozhai*, is a collection of short stories written in classical Chinese language in the 17th Century. The era in which the author Pu lived and his personal situation brought him democratic enlightenment and various reflections. For example, he insisted on “benefiting the people and helping the others”, escaping from worldly constraints and pursuing freedom of mind. All these ideals of life were written in his work *Liaozhaizhiyi*. In addition, *Liaozhaizhiyi* also contains an extraordinary aesthetic pursuit and the author’s rich literary cultivation.

Therefore, although the work *Liaozhaizhiyi* is famous for its depictions of various types of ghosts, monsters, and fantastic anecdotes, its literary and aesthetic value has long been neglected.

2.2 English translations of *Liaozhaizhiyi*

From the first abridged English translation of *Liaozhaizhiyi* by Giles in 1880, the history of its English translations has been over 140 years to the present day. Up to now, there are a total of 18 abridged English translations and one full translation of *Liaozhaizhiyi*. Among them, the more noteworthy ones include Giles’ translation first published in 1880, Denis Mair and Victor Mair’s translation first published in 1989, John Minford’s translation published in 2006, and the six volumes translated by Sondergard published successively from 2008 to 2014.

2.3 Introduction to Sondergard’s Version

The English translation of *Liaozhaizhiyi*, despite its many translators and versions, was composed by fragmentary translations, abridged translations, or translations the source text of which was not the original Chinese text for more than a hundred years, from 1880 to 2014. The original text of *Liaozhaizhiyi* consists of 491 short stories, of which only 165 were selected in the most complete English translation before Sondergard’s version. In 2008, Sondergard completed the first and second volumes of his English translation of *Liaozhaizhiyi*, which was based on “*The Complete New Annotations of Liaozhaizhiyi*” (《全本新注聊斋志异》) edited by Zhu Qikai of People’s Literature Publishing House, and the translated version was titled *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*, published by Jain Publishing Company in the U.S.. In 2014, the sixth volume of his translation was published, announcing the first full English translation of *Liaozhaizhiyi*.

Sondergard is an American sinologist and professor of English at St. Lawrence University. In the course of his teaching, he has translated some stories of *Liaozhaizhiyi* for material, and they were well received by his students. When Sondergard realized that there was still no complete English translation of *Liaozhaizhiyi*, he decided to start the work himself.

The research value of Sondergard’s translation lies not only in the fact that it is the first and currently the only full translation into English, but also in the high quality of this version and the lack of related research. Sondergard translated this work with a serious attitude and made many field trips to different parts of China. While translating, he also wrote research papers related to *Liaozhaizhiyi*. Nevertheless, a search on CNKI with the keywords “宋贤德” and “Sondergard” yielded a total of less than 20 results,

and some of these documents do not take Sondergard's *Liaozhaizhiyi* translation as the main research object. Sondergard's translation of *Liaozhaizhiyi* and his identity as a translator have not received much attention.

3. Textual Analysis

In addition to the spiritual connotation and aesthetic pursuit mentioned above, the language of Pu's *Liaozhaizhiyi* is beautiful, precise, vivid and concise. The work has a high literary value when compared with similar novels written in classical Chinese. Just as many Chinese readers only treat *Liaozhaizhiyi* as a strange and interesting novel of ghosts and monsters and only see its entertainment function when reading the original text, some of the English translations of *Liaozhaizhiyi* have the same tendency. For example, Minford's translation is in an easygoing style, which has been argued to be "designed to satisfy the needs of the lower-level target language readers" and partially undermined the literary character of *Liaozhaizhiyi*. And in Giles' abridged translation of 165 stories, he has cut or rewritten the texts he considered to be cumbersome or uninteresting, including some details and parts of the plots; he has also added some plots not found in the original text. This is a rewriting of the narrative features of the source text as well. On the whole, in the English translations of *Liaozhaizhiyi* before Sondergard's version, translators manipulated the original text comparatively frequently.

Sondergard placed great emphasis on the fidelity of translation, opposes manipulation, and advocates the strategy of foreignization. These ideas of translation determined his translation's respect for the narrative and stylistic features of the source text, and allowed this translated version to have a high degree of literary quality. The progressiveness and pioneering nature of Sondergard's version can be seen in one reader's comments on it, "Previously, I had never considered *Liaozhaizhiyi* to be a literary work."

Since *Liaozhaizhiyi* is a novel written in classical Chinese and the translator can only base the translation on its vernacular meaning or the form of vernacular Chinese language combined with notes, therefore, the situation is comparatively complicated at the language and textual level. In order to explore the literary fidelity of Sondergard's translation, narratology is no less a powerful tool. This paper takes other three translated versions as a slight reference. Although these versions have their own characteristics and merits, their degree of fidelity to the original text or to foreignization is not as refined as that of Sondergard's translation in a comprehensive manner, and thus, from the literary and narratological perspectives, translations other than Sondergard's version are prone to the problem of paying insufficient attention to the narrative features of the source text, which is more likely to emphasize the characteristics of Sondergard's translation.

Looking at the following aspects of Sondergard's treatments and their manifestation in narratology, it can be concluded that Sondergard's translation not only highly respected and was faithful to the source text, but sometimes even emphasized the narrative effect of the source text.

3.1 Plot and Structure

The peculiar and vagarious storyline created by Pu is one of the things that makes *Liaozhaizhiyi* so interesting and enjoyable. The stories in *Liaozhaizhiyi* often have ups and downs and are unexpected without losing their structural integrity.

In the original text of *Liaozhaizhiyi*, there are often long paragraphs, and there are also some stories that are not short but are not subdivided into different paragraphs throughout the whole text, which is a subdividing habit that exists in Pu's work as well as in many other classical Chinese novels. In the case of "Tongrenyu" (《瞳人语》), one of the stories in *Liaozhaizhiyi*, for example, the source text was divided into three paragraphs, the second of which is quite long and has a lot of dialogues and plot twists. In Giles' translation, he not only did not further subdivide the text, but also combined the whole piece into one long paragraph. Sondergard's translation, on the other hand, divided the whole text into 27 paragraphs according to the rhythm and dialogues. This kind of segmentation by the translator has made the story more rhythmic and layered and enhanced the readability, and at the same time, it also counteracted to a certain extent the obstacles to comprehension brought by Sondergard's elegant translation language to the readers.

In addition, in his translation, Sondergard "endeavored to faithfully follow Pu's syntax, punctuation, and diction". Reading Sondergard's translation, one can easily find that wherever English grammar can be taken into account, the faithfulness of the translation has gone so far as to leave the source text intact in terms of which phrase is followed by a comma and which ends with a period. For example:

[Example 1]

济南一僧，不知何许人。赤足衣百衲，日于芙蓉、明湖诸馆，诵经抄募。与以酒食、钱、粟，皆弗受；叩所需，又不答。

(蒲松龄, 1989)

In Jinan, there was a certain Buddhist monk, about whose background no one knew anything. Barefoot, his robe full of patches, all day long he wandered through the restaurants and hotels on Lotus and Clear Lake streets, chanting and collecting donations. But if he was offered food and drink, money, or treats, he wouldn't accept them; when he was asked what he needed, he wouldn't answer.

(Sondergard, 2008)

It can be seen that the translation has restored the punctuation and pauses of the source text as much as possible. The translation of "不知何许人" into "about whose background no one knew anything" with inverted sentence and attributive clause not only restored the punctuation but also realized the rhetorical beauty brought by the ellipsis in the source text.

The two sentences "....., 皆弗受" and "....., 又不答" were separated by a semicolon, which was more symmetrical and progressive in meaning. The translator retained the semicolon and used the short sentences "he wouldn't accept them" and "he wouldn't answer" to reflect the symmetry, which is in line

with the rhythm of the source text. This treatment may be due to the fact that the original language text has a strong sense of tempo and rhythm. Due to the special characteristics of a literary text, some of its features and effects are bound to be lost in translation, and the translator can only take some other ways to compensate for them, such as trying to restore the sense of beauty of sentence patterns, rhythm and vocabulary.

Aristotle's classic definition of narrative plot, "plot, the putting together of events", involves not only the structure of the story, but also attention to the readers' aesthetic psychology. He believed that the organization of the plot must follow the principle of organic integrity, emphasizing the influence of the sequence of events on the whole story and the proportion of the size of each part of the plot. Therefore, in Sondergard's translation, whether it was re-dividing the paragraphs or following very strictly the sentence structure and arrangement order of the source text, it reflected a kind of plotting that takes into account both the fluency of the passage and the fidelity to the narrative structure of the original text.

3.2 Character Discourse

Liaozhaizhiyi has created a number of classic and well-known characters, and its extensive character dialogues play an important role in expressing the characters' personalities and making the plot coherent. In Giles' translation, many direct speeches in the source text became submerged speeches, which means the translator summarized the content of the characters' discourse, while the specific words of the characters were obscured by the editorial process.

[Example 2]

予姊丈之祖，宋公讳焘，邑廩生。一日，病卧，见吏人持牒，牵白颠马来，云：“请赴试。”公言：“文宗未临，何遽得考？”吏不言，但敦促之。公力疾乘马从去。

(蒲松龄, 1989)

MY eldest sister's husband's grandfather, named Song Dao, was a graduate. One day, while lying down from indisposition, an official messenger arrived, bringing the usual notification in his hand and leading a horse with a white forehead to summon him to the examination for his master's degree. Mr. Song here remarked that the Grand Examiner had not yet come, and asked why there should be this hurry. The messenger did not reply to this, but pressed so earnestly that at length Mr. Song roused himself, and getting upon the horse rode with him.

(Giles, 2010)

The grandfather of my elder sister's husband was named Song Tao, a scholarship student in his county. One day, while he was ill and lying in bed, an official leading a white-blazed horse brought him a formal document and told him, "You are requested to attend an examination."

Song replied, "The civil examiner hasn't arrived yet, so why has an examination been set so hastily?" The officer didn't answer him, but just urged him to go. Though weakened by his illness, Song rode out after him on his horse.

(Sondergard, 2008)

Song Tao was the grandfather of my elder sister's husband. He was a first-degree graduate and holder of an annual government stipend.

One day, he was lying ill in bed when he saw a messenger arrive at his door, bearing an official-looking document and leading a horse with white markings on its forehead.

'You are hereby summoned to the examination for the second degree.'

'But the Examiner has not arrived in town yet. They cannot be holding an examination!'

The messenger made no reply, but urged him to be on his way. So Song struggled out of bed, climbed on to the horse and was carried away down an unfamiliar road, which soon led to the outskirts of a city grand enough to be a royal capital.

(Minford, 2006)

In contrast to Giles, Sondergard retained the direct speeches in each character's discourse, adhering to the principle of not altering any discourse pattern of the source text. In [Example 2], Giles' translation changed the direct speech and covered the dialogues in the source text with "to summon", so that readers may misunderstand the meaning of the text and think that Song had already decided to take the exam. This greatly weakened the role of the first paragraph of the story in laying the groundwork for the later examination, which was actually a strange and abnormal "examination", and also weakened Song's surprise and doubt at that time, which could not be contrasted with "公方悟，顿首泣曰" in the later text that constituted a plot twist and highlighted Song's image of a filial son.

Although Minford's version retained the narrative character of direct speech, the translation was not very accurate. The words "for the second degree" by Minford and "for his master's degree" by Giles were both additional words by the translator. The source text simply said "请赴试", and this examination would either be "考城隍" which was already stated in the title, or an examination unknown to Song. Such an additional translation would only add to the confusion of the reader. The syntax and tone of Minford's translation, "They cannot be holding an examination!", also did not fit the characterization of Song as talented, filial, and bedridden.

3.3 Intrusive Narrator

One of the features of *Liaozhaizhiyi* is that the author Pu attached the expression "异史氏" to nearly two hundred of his stories. This appellation meant the author himself, and it usually appeared at the end of a story, making a comment that expressed the meaning of art in a straightforward way. This form was in fact modeled after the "太史公曰" in *Shiji* (《史记》), became a kind of echo and inheritance of the spirit of *Shiji*, reflecting Pu's spiritual quest in writing *Liaozhaizhiyi*, and also allowing readers to understand the connotation of the stories in a deeper way.

In narratological theories, "异史氏" is a kind of intrusive narrator, as opposed to the objective narrator status of the author in the presentation of the stories. At the same time, this phenomenon can be classified as pointing, expressing and revealing in non-narrative discourse. *Liaozhaizhiyi* contains a large number of unexpected and thought-provoking stories, and on the way to telling these stories, the author did not reveal any of whatever opinions or feelings he might have. But in "异史氏曰", the author freely

expressed his subjective feelings and evaluations, which showed the role of intrusive narrator. Intrusive narrators often have strong emotions and tones with deterrent power to punish the evil and uphold the good, which is coincident with the theme of *Liaozhaizhiyi*. It is worth noting that many authors intrude in the narrative by combining storytelling with the expression of subjective feelings, while Pu separated the two, telling the story in a very traditional and objective narrative, while speaking freely when it came to the part of the story where he took “异史氏曰” as a reminder. This kind of twist and contrast are suitable for the expression of the main idea of *Liaozhaizhiyi*, so that the readers, on the one hand, are immersed in the tricky plot, but on the other hand, they can “communicate with the author” and gain more insights.

In different English translations of *Liaozhaizhiyi*, most of the translators did not translate the part of “异史氏曰”, such as Giles and Minford, while some others chose the strategy of deleting, rewriting, or adding in the part of “异史氏曰”. The translations by Sondergard and by Denis Mair & Victor Mair are rare versions that have completely and faithfully translated the part of “异史氏曰”.

[Example 3]

异史氏曰：“一笑之知，许之以身，世人或议其痴；彼田横五百人，岂尽愚哉！此知希之贵，贤豪所以感结而不能自己也。顾茫茫海内，遂使锦绣才人，仅倾心于蛾眉之一笑也，亦可慨矣！”

(蒲松龄，1989)

The collector of these strange tales remarks, “To pledge oneself to another on the basis of nothing but a smile might seem pretty foolish to most people: but if that's foolish, then the deaths of Tian Heng's five hundred men would have to be the most foolish thing of all! Recognizing his rare value and virtuous example, those warriors felt moved and couldn't stop themselves from wanting to join him. So considering the infinite variety of our world, for a gifted young man to devote his splendid talents to nothing more than the smile of a beautiful woman would really be admirable!”

(Sondergard, 2008)

The Chronicler of the Tales comments: “Some may call it foolish for a man to commit himself to a woman when no more recognition than a smile has passed between them. But could the five hundred followers of Tian Heng have all been fools? From them we learn how highly men value those who recognize their worth, and what makes able, outstanding men rally around a leader without thinking of themselves. And yet, it would surely be tragic if a young man in all the splendor of his gifts could find nothing more in this vast world on which to pin his hopes for recognition than the smiles of a young beauty!”

(Mair, 2007)

It is important to note that in some stories, the part of “异史氏曰” do not coincide with the main text or do not coincide completely with it. For instance, in [Example 3], the first two sentences of the part of “异史氏曰” in “*Liancheng*” (《连城》), one of the stories in *Liaozhaizhiyi* are closely related to the content of the story, expressing the difficulty of finding a close friend and the preciousness of encounter

and understanding. However, there is a twist in the last sentence, “亦可慨矣” means “it is really sad”, expressing the negativity towards the idea that talented people could only fall in love with a beauty because there is no confidant who truly knows them. And it also overthrows the positive conception of the love between Qiaosheng and Liancheng that the readers have when reading the story.

Sondergard translated this part completely, and the word order is basically the same as that of the source text. In [Example 3], there is an allusion of “田橫五百人”, which is meant to praise Qiaosheng’s spirit of “a gentleman is ready to die for his bosom friends”. In Mair’s version, it is translated as “the deaths of Tian Heng’s five hundred men” without any note, which will confuse the target readers in the absence of any mention of “Tian Heng” in the preceding text. Sondergard added a note to introduce the allusion after the direct translation.

However, Sondergard’s translation sometimes lacks precision in meaning and wording, and there are also mistranslations. For example, he chose the word “collector” for “异史氏”, and Mair used the word “chronicler” that better reflects the concept of “history” than Sondergard’s. Besides, Mair’s capitalization of the initial letter emphasized the proprietary nature of “异史氏曰”, suggesting to the reader that from here the objective narrative shifted to an intrusive one. For the translation of “亦可慨矣”, Mair’s “tragic” is accurate, while Sondergard’s “admirable” is the exact opposite, which should be due to a deviation in the understanding of classical Chinese.

4. Conclusion

From a literary point of view, Sondergard’s translation has the highest degree of fidelity to the source text of *Liaozhaizhiyi*, basically preserving and restoring many of its narrative features. Sondergard’s version is faithful to the original text while also taking into account the readers’ acceptance. And in addition to being *Liaozhaizhiyi*’s first and only existing full translation in English, it also embodies a number of innovations and advances compared with other versions, which is something that future English translations of *Liaozhaizhiyi* could learn from. Of course, there are some defects and omissions in Sondergard’s version, but overall it still seems to be a translation of *Liaozhaizhiyi* with relatively high research value, and should receive more attention in the future.

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