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TRANSLATOR SUBJECTIVITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FEMINIST TRANSLATION  
THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Translators was marginalized in the traditional translation theory, but they have been moved to the center in present translation studies. By tracing the changes of attitude towards translators' role from nobody to somebody in translation, this article moves on to talk about translator subjectivity in feminist translation theory, and discusses the related research on translator subjectivity in China. Research on translator subjectivity has been quite fruitful from 2010 to 2020 based on statistics from core journals in China. Most of them are done through discussion of one single translation version or through comparison among different translation versions, and Chinese ancient classic poems are the most chosen. Then the article presents the problems existed and puts forward suggestion for further research on this topic.

**Key words:** translator, subjectivity, cultural turn, feminist, creativity,

I. Translator's Role---from Nobody to Somebody

Translators have been playing a vital role in international cultural communication and contributing a lot to the development of mankind. But their important role was not given enough attention in traditional translation theories. In traditional translation theories, a translation is only a linguistic transfer and inferior to the original text, and translators are invisible servants. "The translator is understood to be a servant, an invisible hand mechanically turning the word of one language into another" (Godard 1990:91). The original text was given priority and absolute authority while a translator's act was regarded as mechanical transfer, thus ignoring a translator's subjectivity. Only in recent decades do they draw a lot attention in the field of translation and we have witnessed a gradual transition of attitude towards translators.

But scholars have been making constant efforts to acknowledge translator's important role in the translation process. From 46 BC, Cicero gave advices on successful translation and made a distinction between word-for-word translation and translation with more freedom. Then St Jerome (348-420 AD) made clear the differences between word-for-word translation and sense-for-sense translation and recognized that word-for-word translation could result in nonsense, which is still influential nowadays. During the Renaissance, translators demonstrated creative translations as a literary practice.

Then debates about the limits of translators' freedom and translators' responsibility to the author have been on for a long time. The famous American translator Eugene Nida proposed a distinction between 'formal' and 'dynamic equivalence' in the 1960s (Nida, 1964). While the former focuses on the equivalence of form and

content between the original text and translation, the latter focuses on the message received by the original receptors and translation receptors.

In the 1980s came the cultural turn in humanities. Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere urged in the cultural turn in translation studies through their book *Translation, History and Culture* (1990). Meanwhile we see the flourish of postcolonial translation theory, deconstructionism theory, and feminist translation theory. All of these theories brought translators to the center stage. So as Bassnett said,

“Translation has been redefined in recent years as a form of rewriting, and the status of the translator, once dismissed as little more than a hack, has been revalued”. (*Translation Susan Bassnett 2014:3* ).

According to her, translation is to rewrite works of literature and translators has to do many rewritings. These rewritings include “editing, anthologizing, compiling, abridging and a host of other writerly activities, not to mention film and performance versions of written texts, all of which exercise some form of power over a source text”. ( *ibid: 30* )

In post-colonial translation theory, Paz tends to think “Translation and creation are twin processes” (Paz, 1992 :159). So translators are also creators and translations are not inferior to the original text. The representatives of post-colonial translation from South America, the de Campos brothers also think that translators are free agents and they have absolute freedom to rewrite the original text while showing respect for the original text.

Walter Benjamin, in his essay *The Task of The Translator*, tends to regard the act of translation as creating a third space, different from source and target language. According to him, translation is the afterlife of the original text and the translator has the responsibility to ensure its existence in another space. He highlights the significance of the role played by translators (Benjamin, 1992: 80).

Scholars today tend to realize the complexity of the translation process and the importance of the roles translators played both as readers and writers, and even creators. Lawrence Venuti has demanded a greater visibility for translators. In 1995, in his influential book *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995), he again emphasized the role of translator.

“The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text ”. (Venuti, 1995: 1–2)

He used violence of translation to indicate translators’ behavior in the process of translation, which involves “the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs, and representations that preexist it in the translating language and culture, always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality, always determining the production, circulation, and reception of texts” (Ibid:14 ).

From the above, we can see that traditional translation theories put translators at a marginal position. On the one hand, it’s because the emphasis on equivalence between the source text and the translation restrained translators’ creativity and subjectivity. On the other hand, the translation criteria of smooth and natural language in the translation also leads to the invisibility of translators. But the new translation theories realized that translation is not a simple process of linguistic transfer; rather it’s a complex process, which involves constant negotiation between two languages, two cultures and even two different ideologies. So they brought translators under the spotlight and emphasized their agency and creativity. But it’s feminist translation theory that put forward translators’ subjectivity.

## II. Translator Subjectivity in Feminist Translation Theory

“Subjectivity” is a concept in philosophy, and when applied to translation studies, it refers to translators, as the subject of translation, show their subjective agency in the process of translation to meet the goal of translation while respecting the original text. It’s put forward by feminist theorists with the aim of encouraging women to show their subjectivity in translation and fight for their equal rights.

Although there were a lot female translators in history who did a lot of hard work on translating, it's from mid-1970s that French feminist theory was introduced to Anglo-American world and took root there. According to Sherry Simon (Simon, 1996), translation provided Anglo-American feminism with tools to fight. So feminist translation theory began to flourish mainly in Canada, the United States and in France in the 1990s. Its representatives include Sherry Simon, Louise von Flotow, Barbara Godard, Susanne de Lotbiniere Harwood and Lori Chamberlain. They challenged the traditional translation theory and highlighted the subjectivity of translators. Translation is not equivalence to the original text, but a transformation. So Barbara Godard urged feminist translators to write their way into subjective agency through transformance (Godard 1990).

Firstly, they put original texts and translations at equal position. Traditional translation theory regard translators and women in a weak position: translators are handmaidens to authors, women inferior to men (Simon 1996). According to John Florio, all translations are females, which indicates that both of them are inferior to males (Florio, 1903). That's why Susanne de Lotbiniere Harwood gave herself a self- definition: "I am a translation because I am a woman" (de Lotbinière-Harwood 1991: 95). So feminist translation theorists tried to break the unequal relationship between the original text and translation and reject the priority of original text and its author. Translations are important because translators can add their own understanding when reinterpreting the original text, which gives the original text a new life in a different space.

Secondly, by applying some new translation techniques, they redefined the translation criteria of faithfulness. The cultural turn in translation provides a new perspective on the translation process and challenges the authority of original text. During the practices of translation, feminists find ways to eliminate prejudice against women and project the subjectivity of translators. They tend to regard translation as a dynamic process, in which translations should be faithful to the writing project co-created by the author and translator. Here faithfulness does not only apply to the comparison between the original text and translation, but also the exploration of the translation techniques and strategies used by translators in the translation process. The translation process is a constant negotiation between the author and the translator, not the dominance and servant relationship. In order to make readers hear feminist translators' voice, they use the following three translating techniques to show their presence.

Von Flotow discusses the three techniques of feminist translation: supplementing, prefacing and hijacking, which are routine practices of feminist translators (Flotow, 1991). Supplementing means that translators need to intervene in the text because of the differences between languages to compensate the cultural loss in the process of translation. Translators use preface to explain why they translated the text and the translation techniques they employed in their translation, so readers can have a better understanding on the process of translation. Footnote has always been a widely used technique, though which translators can add detailed information about certain cultural or history background. Hijacking is the appropriation of a text, stretch of the text to get new meaning without changing the message implied. By doing so, feminist translators highlight their presence and acknowledge their intervention. So in Sherry Simon's words, "feminist translation implies extending and developing the intention of the original text, not deforming it" (Simon 1996:15).

Feminist translation theory rejected the traditional binary pair of author and translator, original text and translation, faithful and beautiful, seeing translation as a process of creative rereading and rewriting. Different readers have different interpretations on the same text, so as translations. Barbara Godard suggests that in the construction of new meanings, translators need to stretch the language, subvert dominant culture, rewrite and reformulate the translation (Godard, 1990).

Feminist translation theory has called for more attention to the process of intralingual and intercultural transformation. The postcolonial feminist theorist Spivak mentioned the textual and contextual difficulties that all translators have to face and emphasized the subjectivity of translators. They need to make specific choices, do some interventions and transformations to stretch the text and give it a new meaning and hence a new life (Spivak 1993). According to her, a translator's task is to facilitate a love relationship with the original text, "a love

that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her actual or imagined audience at bay" (Spivak, 2000 : 398). Like Venuti, Spivak calls for more visibility of translators, highlighting the importance of challenging the linguistic and cultural hegemony of dominant cultures.

### III. Research on Translator Subjectivity in China

In China, scholars also put translators at the center and research on translators' behavior is a new trend. In order to have a clear idea about research on translator subjectivity in China, the author put it as the key word and searched titles of articles on CNKI, the largest and most influential journal database in China. Based on articles published in China from 2010 to 2020, the author found that there are 1108 articles, which are closely related to translators' subjectivity. The number of related articles published was on increase from the year 2010-2014, with the most of 141 articles in 2014, then a gradual drop from 2015 to 2020, about 111 related articles on average each year. Judged from their content, these articles roughly fall into 4 categories: research on translators' subjectivity through comparison among different translation versions; research on translators' subjectivity through one single translation version; research on translators' subjectivity through certain genre of translations; and research on the development of translator subjectivity theory. For the theories or perspectives employed in the above 1108 articles, they cover hermeneutics, feminist theory, eco-translation theory, which are the top three, then cognitive linguistics, intertextuality, culture studies, deconstructivism, receptive aesthetics and so on.

Among the translations on which they did research, ancient poems rank number one, because they are the best place to demonstrate translators' subjectivity. In contrast to other text genres, poetry translation needs more creativity and subjectivity. In order to help readers have a better understanding of the poem, not only of the linguistic aspects, but also of other aspects like poetic form, structure, word play and so on, translators usually add prefaces, notes and commentaries. To facilitate readers' understanding of the contextual material, translators might employ such devices like adding explanatory sentences, using substitution strategy or even omitting some points.

Chinese ancient poems have strictly regulated poetic forms, and those great poets were very imaginative. Chinese sentences have no tenses and the language mainly depends only on the shift of four tones to indicate different word meanings. Sometimes a single character or word can be a noun, a verb or an adjective, which means they have three forms in the same word. All these make it very difficult for non-native translators to understand, let alone to translate.

Here is a four-line poem, which was created 1500 years ago by the great Chinese poet Dufu. It describes an image that while the author was floating on a river, he felt quite lonely and frustrated because he couldn't go back home and had no idea what to do to help his country even though he had the courage and confidence. The same poem was translated respectively by Rewi Alley from New Zealand, and Stephen Owen from America. Both of them are Chinese poem lovers, having profound knowledge about Chinese culture. But their translations are slightly different.

#### River Bank

Here sits a man by  
The river bank, who thinks  
To return home; he is an  
Ordinary scholar, drifting  
Like a piece of cloud above;  
At night, I am lonely  
As the moon, but at sunset  
I am still of good heart  
In these autumn winds  
My illness gets better

#### Yangtze and Han

At the Yangtze and the Han a voyager longing to go  
home  
Between Ch'ien above and K'un below one broken-  
down man of learning.  
A wisp of cloud, the sky shares this distance,  
Endless night, the moon an equal in solitude  
In setting sun a heart still young, still strong,  
Through autumn's wind, my sickness growing  
better.  
From ancient times they've sustained old horses

In past times, they were kind  
To old horses, not sending  
Them off on tiring journeys  
After they had served so long.  
(Alley, 2001:345)

That they need not take to the long-faring road.  
(Owen, 1981:215-216)

The poem talks about river, cloud, sunset, autumn wind, but translators cannot get any information from the author because he is no longer here. What they have is four lines of 10 words, and all the last word of each line share the same vowel for rhyme. What they can do is to guess from the language, from the context where it's created and then present their own understanding or interpretations to readers. In this process, translators need to project their subjectivity.

While Alley directly omits the culture-loaded phrase "Chien Kun"; Owen supplements it with "between Ch'ien above and K'un below", which gives readers further information. While Alley uses the neutral words "ordinary scholar" to refer to the author's insignificance in a humble way; Owen uses "broken-down man of learning", which has more emotion, and emphasizes the author's difficult situation. But Alley adds another sentence "drifting like a piece of cloud above" to show the author's homelessness. To facilitate readers' understanding, both translators try to add personal pronouns like "I" or "my", which are absent from the Chinese poem. Owen uses "still" three times to show the author's positive attitude, and uses adjective "endless" and noun "solitude" to show the difficult situation of the author. For the last two sentences, which is a classic story in Chinese, Owen presents it very objectively, but Alley uses words "kind", "tiring" and "so" to give more insight into the author's mood.

In all, what is amazing for readers is to notice the vast differences in style, form and image just by following translations of one single four lines poem by two different translators. In the poem, there are some nouns like "cloud, sky, moon, sunset, autumn wind, horse" and adjectives such as "far, lonely, strong", which makes it look like just some disconnected words, or assemble of images. But both translators make full play of their subjectivity and construct slightly different pictures.

#### IV. Reflections

From the 1108 published articles on translator subjectivity, one can see the efforts scholars put in to enrich and deepen the research on this topic. But there are still some problems exist.

First, many scholars are not so clear about the definition of translator subjectivity and have a vague idea about the object of its research. But all of them emphasize the creativity and subjective agency of translators. Second, a big part of the research content are repetitive efforts and have no innovation. Most of them focus on areas manifesting translator subjectivity, like choice of original text, interpretation of the original text, translation techniques used, word choice, etc. and factors restraining translator subjectivity, such as social, cultural factors, and aesthetic factors. The third problem is about research method. Most articles use deductive or narrative method by comparing different translations. Since translations are so important, is it possible to use translation corpus to draw a more convincing conclusion?

#### Conclusion

Translator subjectivity has long been marginalized until it's recognized by feminist translation theory. They regard translation as a kind of creativity, or rewriting of the original text, and endow it a new life in a different time and place. So in feminist theory, translator subjectivity is reconstructed and reinforced, and provides a new perspective on translation. As the three most important elements in translation, original text, translator and translation should be a harmonious three in one unity. The subjectivity of translator is based on successful translation and to meet the goal of translation. Any overemphasis on translator subjectivity will lead to deviation from the original text, interference with reader's understanding, and hence translations will become unacceptable.

In conclusion, translator's status has been largely improved in feminist translation theories, and a lot research has been done on translator subjectivity, but in Chinese context, there is still room to further improve it, especially research on female translators' subjectivity.

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