The Construction of a New Translation Ethics from the Perspective of Chinese Philosophy

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As a cross-linguistic, cross-cultural, and cross-social activity, translation is affected by cultural moralities. Since the ethical standard of faithfulness has been abandoned by theories of cultural criticism and the power of translators' manipulation has been constantly exaggerated, the study of translation ethics is an effective remedy for a current dilemma in translation studies. It is a common phenomenon for some translators to erase the linguistic and cultural differences of Chinese literature by catering to target readers' reception. Social ethics is the foundation of a nation's translation ethics, which means that thoughts from the Western world may not be suitable for the current situation in China. Learning from concepts of Chinese philosophy including *harmony in diversity*, *seeking common ground while reserving differences*, and *honesty* to formulate a new translation ethics will surely restrain translators' subjectivity within appropriate limits and develop world culture in more harmonious fashion.

Keywords: translation ethics, fidelity, Chinese philosophy, translator's subjectivity

1. Introduction: Translation and Ethics

The word "ethics" was derived from the Greek word "ethos" which means the rules and norms formulated by human beings. In Chinese, the word "Lun Li" means the codes of conduct among relatives. With the communication and collision between Chinese and English, the word in both languages began to show the same intentional and extensional meaning. As a cross-linguistic, cross-cultural, and cross-social activity, translation is greatly affected by cultural moralities. Traditionally, the faithful presentation of the original work was the only ethical criterion for translation (Liu 2008, 95-99; 104). By reviewing the translation history of both China and the Western world, we can see that most of translation theorists mention the importance of fidelity and the ethics that translators should carry out in dealing with the original works. In the beginning, fidelity was an ethical concept. In the feudal ethical code and political context, fidelity meant to follow the restriction without complaints (Wang 2004, 5-11). Several famous metaphors are the best proofs of this; people regard translating as painting and translators as servants and matchmakers (Tan 2006, 3-8).

With the *Culture Turn* in translation studies, the traditional ethics was questioned by scholars. The studies from the perspective of hermeneutics, deconstruction, feminism, post-colonialism, and other theories of cultural criticism dismissed and subverted faithfulness in translation. In the opening part of *Les Belles Infidèles*, Georges Mounin (1994, 13) states that all the remarks that despise translation can be reduce to one sentence:

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Translation is not the original work. Mounin reveals people's unrealistic expectation for a so called *perfect translation* and the difficult position in which this placed translators. Based on the Italian proverb, *Traduttore, traditore*, Robert Escarpit (1958, 137) believes that translation is *creative treason*. Cultural school representative Andre Lefevere (1990, 10) points out that *translation is rewriting*. For him, only by the translators' rewritings can the life span of original works be extended. Since the ethical standard of faithfulness has been abandoned, the translators' ability to manipulate texts has been constantly enhanced; the study of translation ethics is an effective remedy for the current difficulties in translation studies.

2. Literature Review: The Study of Translation Ethics

The concept of translation ethics was first put forward by Anthony Behrman in his monograph *L'èpreuve de L'ètranger, Culture et Traduction Dans L' Allemagne Romantique* in 1984. He pointed out that the study of translation ethics is an essential part of translation studies. The goal of translation is to maintain the *difference* and to respect the linguistic and cultural differences of the original work (Behrman 1984, 285-6). In his other important monograph *Pour Une Critique des Traductions: John Donne*, he mentioned that once a translator accepts an assignment, he should shoulder the responsibility to serve the original work, which means he needs to be guided by moral constraints (Behrman 1995, 93). In 1997, Anthony Pym discussed a translator's occupational ethics in *Pour une Ethique du Traducteur*. He claimed that the focus of translation ethics has shifted from the study of fidelity to the application of cross-cultural communication. Pym believed that the faithful translation was no longer appropriate, so we need to break through the traditional constraint (Pym 1997, 82). In 1998, Lawrence Venuti first proposed the concept of a *translation ethics of difference*. He said that translation is the greatest scandal, because no matter what attitude translators hold, they have already destroyed the culture of the original work from an objective point of view. Consequently, we need translation theory to judge whether our translation practices and studies are right or not. Venuti strongly opposed colonization and homogenization in translation, and he come up with the foreignization strategy which maintains the cultural difference in the original work (Venuti 1998, 4-6). Andrew Chesterman analyzed translation ethics from the perspective of responsibilities and rights among subjects, and then he announced the following code of conducts that translators should obey: clarity, truth, trust, and understanding (Chesterman 1997, 147-89). Later, he put forward five principles of translation ethics, including an ethics of representation of the source text or of the author, ethics of service, ethics of communication, norm-based ethics, and ethics of commitment (Chesterman 2001, 139-54).

Although these scholars' concepts and views of translation ethics differ, they have all paid special attention to the concept of *difference*. We can interpret this on the following two levels: First, *difference* is the origin of translation. Without the *differences* between languages, translation loses its meaning to be a task. Translation is not just a simple process of language transformation; it is also related to culture, society, history, ideology, and other complex features. Second, *difference* can also be seen as an obstacle because it is widely distributed in our minds, languages, and cultures (Liu and Xu 2016, 70-77). *The experience of difference* in translation studies can be seen as a conflict between self and otherness, or rather as how to understand another's standpoints and goals. The essential aim of translation is to overcome those *differences* while at the same time acknowledging them. Translators should eliminate hedges of those *differences* and to make them to merge together in order to development themselves.

3. A Case Study: Review of the Translation of Chinese Contemporary Literature

With the development of China's comprehensive national strength, promoting Chinese culture has become the key strategy for reinforcing cultural exchanges and projecting China's new image. A nation's literature is the best way to show the world its unique culture. Because of the *differences* in linguistic and cultural factors, the translation and dissemination of well-translated Chinese literature experience numerous difficulties. Although we have devoted plenty of money and efforts, only a few Chinese writers' works have gained attention in the Western world, and the study of Chinese literature has yet to become mainstream. Because of this situation, some translators have tried to abridge, rearrange, and even rewrite the original works just to cater to Western readers, and regard this as an inevitable development. We need to question whether the considerable sales volume is equivalent to the target readers' acceptance. Do those works that rewrite the originals present real Chinese culture? Do those translated works that have lost their differences retain their value?

Let us take famous American sinologist and translator Howard Goldblatt's translations and his interviews as an example. Goldblatt is regarded as the chief translator of modern and contemporary Chinese literature. He is also the major translator of Mo Yan's works. His great efforts cannot be ignored for they led to the first Nobel Prize in literature of China. Goldblatt's translation strategy is rewarded and respected by some scholars for his success. Goldblatt prefers to use retro-editing methods in his translation, which means to translate is to rewrite a text. Obviously, his strategy will inevitably weaken and eliminate the cultural and linguistic features of the original work. Goldblatt (2002) himself admitted that the nature of translation is rewriting. Shao Lu (2016) classified Goldblatt's retro-editing translation into three types: abridgement, the reorganization of the structure, and the rewriting of the ending. The last feature is the most controversial one. Take Mo Yan's *Garlic Ballads* as an example. This novel was adapted from a real event which tells a sad story caused by a township government's inaction. Unfortunately, the leading characters all died from unfair treatment, but the last chapter of the novel was a news report that told its readers that all the greedy officials were arrested. However, Goldblatt omitted the last chapter in his translation and changed the ending to be a tragedy. This kind of change reflects Western readers' inherent biases that China is undemocratic and in chaotic situation. Their sense of superiority enables them to believe that Western democratic politics are much better than China's. His rewriting of the ending totally meets the needs and beliefs of Western readers (Wu 2014, 151-3; 155; 161).

From interviews, we know that Goldblatt's translation pattern is based on his view that one should translate for target readers. He also argued that Chinese writers' writing styles do not meet the standards of Western literature. Actually, from his words, we can conclude that he had already noticed the importance of the different features of the original work. But for the influence of ethnocentrism, the strategy of translating for target readers has damaged the nature of *difference*. Identity is the thing that distinguishes one from another. And the identity of literature involves the special features about culture and language set one country apart from others. To use an expression, cultural patterns and reading habits that target what readers are familiar with, in order to replace those *differences* in the original works, will do harm to a work's identity.

4. A Comparative Study: Translation Ethics of China and the Western World

The experience of difference not only exists in the barriers that are caused by different languages but also in the way people understand different cultures. From the view of historical development, an attitude of ignorance, contempt, or over-admiration of one's culture is contrary to the nature of equal development. The

reason why translators show their subjectivity in over-translating lies in their disrespect of different cultures. A country's social ethics is the foundation of its translation ethics, so we can see why Chinese and Western translation ethics differs so greatly. The essence of literary translation is the fusion of different translation ethics. A translator's personal ethics should be in line with the ethics of the target culture. The discussion of the *difference* will help in constructing a translation ethics that is suitable for the current situation.

Because of the various viewpoints from which people see our aims and motivations of our behaviors, the study of ethics can be divided into utilitarianism and deontology. Utilitarianism is an ethical theory that states that the best action is the one that maximizes utility. While deontology is the normative ethical position that judges the morality of an action based on rules (Cheng 2008, 145-87).

In China, our society and our ethics are linked closely together. To show its specificity, we usually call it ethical society. China has a long history that values Confucian ethics. Confucian ethics sees *benevolence* as the core value and uses blood relationships to unite the society. Confucianism emphasizes the respect for seniority and the patriarchal idea underlines the doctrine of loyalty and consideration for others. Powerful social ethics restricts citizens in all respects and it also influences translators. So, fidelity is the criterion used to estimate whether a translation is good, or not, in China.

In the Western world, translation ethics is based on utilitarianism. The theories of Cicero, Schleiermacher, Berman, Pym, and Venuti all show this to be their purpose. Functionalist theories of translation even announce that the goal of translation determines its translation strategy and translators have the right to change the original text in order to gain maximum benefit.

5. A New Way: The Construction of New Translation Ethics from the Perspective of Chinese Philosophy

The current mainstream theories of translation ethics are proposed by foreign scholars. Taking their gems of wisdom for reference will surely contribute to the construction of new Chinese translation ethics. We should notice that all theories should fulfill certain requirements in application, and it is inappropriate for us to use them without modification in translating Chinese literature. Chinese philosophy contains rich ethical thoughts which have provided the principles of Chinese life for thousands of years. Although ancient thoughts have left a distinct imprint of their times, we can reject the dross and assimilate the fine essence and then sublate to cater to the current situation. Those ideological essences can still show their importance in guiding our codes of conduct, and our cross-language and cross-culture translation activities.

5.1. Taking Harmony in Diversity as the Base

Guoyu·Zhengyu was the first to come up with the idea of *harmony in diversity* (Zuo 1987, 196). It tells us that only in a balanced condition can new things appear which, just like that water, fire, and other seasonings are the foundation of delicacy and different musical instruments are the guarantee of a beautiful and touching melody. Only with a variety of different things can the harmonious development of the world be guaranteed; the exclusion of diversity will lead to a monotonous situation and none of the participants will develop. Confucius said that "A gentleman gets along with others, but does not necessarily agree with them" (2001, 173; 332). In our current society, *harmony in diversity* means to respect the cultural diversity and to balance the opinions from different countries and nations in order to achieve harmonious coexistence. Considering the fact of the diversity cultures of the world, *harmony in diversity* requires us to recognize their diversity and

complementarity while seeking harmonious development. The pursuit of cultural homogenization will eventually lead to cultural endangerment. Translators need to be confident of a nation's culture and to respect other countries' cultural identities.

5.2. Taking Seeking Common Ground While Reserving Differences as the Premise

Seeking common ground while reserving differences is an another ethical principle for translators to follow. To maintain the linguistic and cultural difference or to remove them is an ethical question for all modern translators to answer. Today, economic and cultural hegemony still occupy a dominant position. To protect minority cultures is particularly important and urgent. In the past, translators usually have neglected the protection of the exotic cultures of original works, and they have tended to use the target culture to replace them. In the era of global localization, the maintenance and coexistence of multiple cultures has become a theme of the times. Translators are not allowed to follow the old routine. The duty of the new era for them is to maintain the *difference* to target readers. Language is just like a filter, which means that it will omit the value and mode of thinking rooted in one language when suffering transformation. Translators should be cautious when dealing with even a single word for following the *translation ethics of difference*. *Seeking common ground while reserving differences* will widen the world citizens' horizon and offer them fresh things in which to be interested.

5.3. Taking Honesty as the Criterion

The idea of *honesty* holds an important position and rich connotation in Chinese philosophy. *Honesty* is the rule of the world. Mencius said that *honesty* is the foundation of the universe and the pursuit for human beings. Xuncius (1999; 19-20) also expressed the same meaning. All those sages believed that the absolute truth of the universe is the objective law. And the virtue of humanity is to be honest and to learn from the natural law. The pursuit of *honesty* requires us to constantly strive for perfection in our jobs.

The task of translation needs a variety of subjects to work together, including the author, the initiator, the translator, and the target readers. Once the translator accepts the task, he and the other subjects are linked closely, which means that *honesty* is of prime importance to ensure a smooth co-operation. The mutual trust between subjects will generate friendly co-operation and quality translation. The translator is the mediator, which means he must give consideration to the benefits of all parties. Thus, translators need to hold an honest attitude during their translating work, because any dishonest behavior will break the balance.

6. Conclusion

Against the background of economic globalization and cultural diversity, the ethical relationship between the translator, the author, and the target readers should be based on respectful co-operation. Currently, target readers are no longer just satisfied with literature that meets the standards of their values and reading habits. They prefer to experience the exotic culture and feeling of freshness. At the same time, the misunderstanding and subjective presupposition of the source language's culture also needs faithful and authentic translation to bring about change. Therefore, the translator's respect for the author should return to the nature of faithfulness. Especially for the cultural differences, translators need to meet the needs of target readers' real demands which is an important obligation for translators. Hence, considering *harmony in diversity* as the base, *seeking common ground while reserving differences* as the premise, and *honesty* as the criterion to formulate a new translation ethics will restrain translators' subjectivity within appropriate limits.

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