

## Original Paper

# An Exploration of the English Translation Strategy

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### **Abstract**

*In translation studies, the role of the translator is becoming more and more conspicuous. Despite the fact that translation is a transfer from one language to another, especially a semantic one, the role of the translator is, on no account, a simple proxy of technological communication or a passive transcultural mediator. During recent years, scholars have conducted an array of researches on translation process, from the perspective of linguistics, cognitive psychology, psychological linguistics, etc. As for translation process, it is imperative that the translator take various questions into consideration, such as the characteristics of the target language, the cultural factors of the target language, the perception of the original text, the translator's habits, etc. The English translation of *Yuewei Caotang Biji* by Yi Izzy Yu and John Yu Branscum has been conceived of as popular in the English world, and has achieved superb effect of transcultural communication. This translated work's strategy of translating as editing has substantial effects in its 'success, which renders this book easily available to readers in the target culture.*

### **Keywords**

*English translation of *Yuewei Caotang Biji*, translating as editing, transcultural communication*

## **1. Introduction**

*Yuewei Caotang Biji* is a masterpiece of biji (笔记) novel of China, which was written by Ji Yun in late eighteenth century. In the past century, only *Yuewei Caotang Biji* is fluent in writing, articulate in analyzing, and can be complimented as a masterpiece (Lu, 2020). Among the biji novels in Ji Yun's era, the most representative and influential one is *Yuewei Caotang Biji* (Hu, 2013). The language style of his book is explicit, fluent and readily accessible, but the author achieved an effect of sharpness in thought out of such plain writing style; its arguments are accurate and precise (Qi, 2015).

Regardless of this book's influence and significance in Chinese literature, no complete English translation of it has emerged, and the current small amounts of its translated versions are limited in terms of influence. In 2021, Empress Wu Books published *The Shadow Book of Ji Yun: The Chinese Classic of Weird True Tales, Horror Stories, and Occult Knowledge*, a partial English translation of *Yuewei Caotang*

*Biji*. This translation was finished by Yi Izzy Yu and her husband John Yu Branscum. Once published, this translation has received a substantial amount of praise among English readers. In Goodreads, a renowned book review website, there are hundreds of comments and reviews for this translation, most of them scoring four points and above out of total five. In Amazon, an influential shopping website, this translation has been received with ovation, too. According to Worldcat, the world's famous online library collection search tool, nine libraries in the U.S. have stored this translation into their preservation. It is conceivable that this translation of *Yuwei Caotang Biji* has emerged as a project worthy of academic research. However, so far, only one paper has made a brief introduction to this translation, pointing out that the translators of this translation have conducted bold reforms in translating and editing the original text (Liu & Zhong, 2022). Nevertheless, no further specific details and in-depth analysis for the translators' measures have been unveiled.

There is a research gap in terms of the translation of *Yuwei Caotang Biji* by Yi Izzy Yu and John Yu Branscum. It is necessary that research on this translation's strategies of translating and editing be conducted.

## 2. The Reason for Their Strategy of Translating as Editing

Translating as editing here denotes a procedure of editing during the translation process. In other words, it means a variation translation activity in which translating comes after the processing the original material (Wang & Tao, 2019). Translation is deemed an intervention, in which translators involve themselves in the translation process, integrating their knowledge and belief into the handling of the original text (Qin & Zhang, 2020). That being said, Yi Izzy Yu and John Yu Branscum also clearly articulated their translation thoughts in their translation of *Yuwei Caotang Biji*: "We balanced fidelity to Ji Yun's original texts with explicitness about many otherwise implicit matters of cultural subtext and meaning. In this, we privileged conveying the meaning, nuance, and aesthetic effects of a source text over word-for-word transcription, following the Yan Fu method of translation—which allows for the insertion of additional background information to communicate in new languages and to new audiences. (Yu & Branscum, 2021)"

Through such a declaration, it is explicit that the two translators have adopted the strategy of translating as editing. Factually, certain clues on the reason for such a strategy are overt in the translation work itself: "In 2011, Yi Izzy Yu left Northern China for the US, with nothing but \$500 in her pocket and a love of traditional Chinese stories that she'd inherited from her grandmother. Living in a rented room in the small Pennsylvania town of Indiana, late at night she would comfort her homesickness by eating shrimp chips and reading Ji Yun's stories in their original Classical Chinese. It was in these moments that the thought first came to her that it would be cool to do a popular-culture English translation of Ji Yun's work that focused on its contribution to speculative fiction and nonfiction. (Yu & Branscum, 2021)" It can be concluded that in the first place, Yi Izzy Yu believed that it is indispensable to render this novel in popular culture, given that it is of contribution to speculative fiction and nonfiction.

In light of the volume of *Yuewei Caotang Biji*, which adds up to some 1,200 pieces of stories with 400,000 Chinese characters, it is natural that some kind of adaptation in its translating be inevitable. This can be partially verified by the fact that no complete English translation of it has sprouted so far. All the current English translations of this book appear to be partial. It should also be pointed out that each of these translations reflects its translator's unique thoughts on translation. As far as Yu and Branscum's translation is concerned, the translators pointed out, in the preface, that the pieces of stories selected in their translation are the most striking and memorable ones. Though the translators did not explicitly signify that they had adopted the translation strategy of translating as editing, their translation method corresponds to that of it, which caters to the target-culture readers, selects the appropriate parts in the original text, and conveys the original text's information in an accurate, fluent, flexible manner, so as to achieve the best effect of transcultural communication (Wu, 2015).

The reason for translating a book consists in part in the prevalence of the source-language culture (Paloposki, 2021). With the establishment of international links and interactions, cultures in different hemispheres meet and integrate in an unprecedented pace. The Zhiguai (志怪) or mystery stories in *Yuewei Caotang Biji* attract the western readers dramatically. Therefore, the two translators, Yi Izzy Yu and John Yu Branscum, selected one hundred or so mystery stories into their translation work. And, in accordance with the themes, these stories are divided into three parts: Strange Nonfictions, Fables and Philosophies, and The End of Things.

The following is an example of the way the translators conduct their translation.

Original text: "No one knows where Hu Gongshan, a doctor, comes from. Some say that his surname is actually Jin, not Hu, and served Wu Sangui as a spy. In the wake of Wu's collapse, he had to tamper with his name. Nevertheless, for lack of evidence, it is difficult to elucidate his identity. I met him when I was six or seven. He was already in his eighties at that time, but acted swiftly and briskly like a monkey, and owned superior wrestling techniques. Once when he was in a boat for travel, he came upon a group of bandits, but had nothing to fight back in his hand but a smoke pipe. Staggeringly he used this very tool and defeated all the members of the gang. By contrast, he is most afraid of ghosts, and dares not go to bed alone. He said that he had chanced upon a zombie when he was a teenager. Using his fists to punch the zombie, it felt as if he had hit woods and stones, and he was almost caught by the zombie. Luckily, he jumped to the peak of a high tree. Afterwards, the zombie jumped, circling the tree, and it was not until daylight that it stopped moving and hugged the tree. He did not dare watch downwards until a group of merchants who had fastened bells under their horses' heads passed by. He saw that the zombie had white furs throughout the body; its eyes were staggeringly red; its fingers were like curved hooks, and its teeth protruded outside its mouth, like sharp knives. He was almost terrified to death by such scenes. Another time, he lived in an inn in a mountain, and felt something moving in his quilt, which he suspected as a snake or rat. A bit later, this thing extended its figure, grew bigger gradually, went outside the quilt and put its head on his pillow, sleeping together with him. He found that it was a naked woman. She grabbed him with her arms, and he felt as though he had been bound with a thick piece of rope. The

woman began to kiss him and breathe out slowly, and meanwhile he sensed a strong smell of blood. He was scared into a coma by this. He did not get awake until someone came to his rescue the next day. Ever since, he became timid. Confronted with a whirl of wind or the shadow of the moon after dusk, he would step back with terror.”

As for such a short, simple story in the original text, the translators made an innovative adaptation in translation. They not only separated this story into two subdivisions (the subtitles are “THE MYSTERIOUS DR. HU” and “TWO EPISODES TO CONSIDER” respectively), but also added some cohesive sentences in appropriate places, rendering the story more readable. Why did the translators behave as such at all? Why should such a concept of translating as editing ever have evolved?

The Chinese language differentiates from English in part in its brevity and relative lack of logical clues. This case is especially in accordance with the ancient Chinese language, with which the author of *Yuwei Caotang Biji* wrote. Generally speaking, there is neither punctuation nor separator in ancient Chinese language, making its semantic relations hard to discern. It is usually the modern Chinese scholars who assign the task of dividing the ancient Chinese sentences, which sometimes leads to controversies and uncertainties. For lack of logical sequences in lexical and grammatical aspects, and due to grammatical ambiguity, the ancient Chinese language is hard to translate. Additionally, on account of the disparity of social reality between ancient and modern China, between the West and China, it becomes overwhelmingly challenging for the translators to make accurate judgments in translation decision. In a nutshell, a series of problems cause impediments to the translators’ work. These seemingly irreconcilable obstacles make, in a way, the translators’ strategy of translating as editing justified or even imperative.

The following is another instance for the translators’ strategy of translating as editing.

The original text: “When I was in the place where I spent my exile, an officer took dozens of official papers in front of me, and offered me a brush pen and ink, to let me write some judgmental words on them. He said: ‘For those who die in this place but want to get their coffins back to the hometown, they must acquire such a passport as a rule. Otherwise, their souls would not be allowed to get through the gate by which they must pass.’ Because the passport goes to the underworld, the words on it shouldn’t be written in red, and the seal on it is also in black ink. Looking at the sentences on the passport, I felt it was ridiculous. It says: ‘This document is for acquiring the passport: this passport proves that somebody, at a certain age, died here on a certain day in a certain month in a certain year. At present his or her relatives would transport the coffin to the hometown, and this passport is permitted to be given to them. Upon seeing the passport, the ghost soldiers along the way back should release the dead person’s spirit after checking. Don’t ask for bribe money or delay the schedule, causing inconvenience for the journey.’ I said: ‘This is nothing but the lower rank officials’ excuse for asking for bribe money.’ Therefore, I notified the general in charge and canceled the rule. After ten days, someone reported that some sound of cry had erupted from the tomb field west of downtown, insofar as the dead ones had not got the passport, which made their souls unable to be transported to the hometown. Hearing this, I rebuked this person for his words’ absurdity. After another ten days, someone reported that the cry sound had been

near downtown. And I rebuked him as well. Another ten days later, I heard some ghostly sound outside my house's wall. But I believed it was made purposefully by the lower rank officials. Several days later, the sound became outside my window. At the moment, the moonlight was as bright as daylight, and I got up to search for the source of sound, but nobody was found. My colleague said: 'Your idea on the passport is justified, and even the general cannot deny your views. Nevertheless, it is now obvious that everyone has heard the ghostly cry, and those who had not got the passport would blame you deeply. Why not try sending out the passports to keep those who speak ill of you muted? Providing the sound would remain, it would even more prove your argument.' I followed his advice unwillingly, and the sound stopped just that very night. Another time, Song Jilu, an official in the army, suddenly fell into a coma in a room. Long afterwards, he got awake and said his mother had come. Before long, someone handed in a document, saying Jilu's mother had died on the way to see him."

Confronted with such a story, the two translators not only adapted the dreary conversation in it into a readable form of dialogue, with the words uttered alternately like a popular novel. Besides, the translators supplemented something that are not present in the original text, which can be viewed as the translators' addition to the author Ji Yun's thoughts. All of this serves to fulfill the readers' expectations. For instance, the following are two slices of supplementary evaluative content by the two translators: "Paper creates a great many things. Marriages, official positions, educational degrees, residency. All of these states of being require documents and indeed are not considered real or valid without them. In fact, civilizations owe their existence not just to physical things but to things created by the drawing up of papers. Because the people believe it so, these things are as real as physical artifacts. It is interesting that both spirits and documents direct the physical realm without themselves being physical." "The rules that govern our world include many that are known but many more that are unknown or only half-understood. While people are eager to invent explanations for why the world is the way it is, at best their explanations can only account for the visible, physical world for that is the part of the world sensible to human eyes."

Simply put, the two translators' method of translating as editing lies in various reasons. First and foremost, due to the huge length of the original book, no full English translation of it has emerged so far, and almost all translators of it have translated it partially, selecting the content they deem essential. Secondly, it is natural that the translators divide the original text and add some cohesive materials into the translation, thanks to the characteristics of ancient Chinese language. Last but not least, the translators are warranted the privilege of exerting their influence of thought on translation, and intervention is sometimes inevitable in the process of translation, insofar as no rigid, invariable rules exist in literary translation. And instead, it is a process of decision for the translators to analyze and conduct their own translation. Therefore, it is natural to draw the conclusion that the translators would interpose something they would like to express between the lines in their translation.

### 3. Conclusion

*Yuewei Caotang Biji* is a masterpiece of biji novel in ancient China, which is of significance in terms of passing traditional Chinese culture on. Under this backdrop, the emergence of Yi Izzy Yu and John Yu Branscum's translation have made overseas readers interested in this book in an unprecedented way. All of this should prompt the translation critics to examine what translation strategies have been utilized in this translation.

With the acceleration of globalization and the contrastive literature's "diverse culture turn", literature worldwide are being paid close heed to. And translation plays a constructive, complex and pivotal role in this process. The literary genre of *Yuewei Caotang Biji* is biji, a unique one. Perhaps, due to this reason, translation critics have not attached much importance to it and its kind.

In the process of transcultural communication, there is no doubt that the authentic "taste" of the original culture should be preserved. However, it seems almost reasonable that certain kind of creative adaptation in translation caters to the needs of foreign readers. In storytelling, it is partially imperative that the story be told in a way that can best fit into with the target readers' cultural context; only in this way can the story be best accepted by the audiences (Xie, 2018).

One of the essential missions of translated literature includes introducing to foreign readers the preeminent, extraordinary literature. There is a dominant criterion in evaluating whether a translated literary work is superb, i.e. whether it can make noteworthy contributions to the culture of the target language country. Taking that point into consideration, there arises a question of concern of whether strict literal translation can become excellent, insofar as the translated work ought to make the readers feel a kind of beauty, philosophical inspiration and spiritual touch just as the source language readers do.

In light of this, the strategy of translating as editing Yi Izzy Yu and John Yu Branscum adopt in their translation of *Yuewei Caotang Biji* seems to be a product of natural selection for being welcome in the target language culture.

In translation studies, an array of critical reflections is necessary (Pizarro & Paulo, 2020). And in translation, something seems to get invisible (Bámgbóşé et al., 2023). Only after sufficient, careful observations are conducted can an evaluation for certain new phenomena in a translation be made. This remains essential in translation criticism.

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