Original Paper

A Comparative Study of Three Chinese Versions of *Oliver Twist* in the Perspective of Translator's Subjectivity

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Abstract

This study focuses on three Chinese versions of Charles Dickens' novel Oliver Twist by Lin Shu, Rong Ru'de, and He Wen'an. From the perspective of translator's subjectivity, it explores how the three translators interpreted and reconstructed the original work under distinct historical contexts. Through a comparative analysis of title translation, sentence rendering, and narrative perspective, the paper reveals how the translators' choices reflect their subjectivity, and further examines how such subjectivity influences the stylistic features of the translations and their reception by readers.

Keywords

translator's subjectivity, Lin Shu, Zei Shi, Oliver Twist

1. Introduction

Completed by Charles Dickens in 1838, *Oliver Twist* centers on the tribulations of the orphan Oliver, sharply exposing the hypocrisy of the workhouse system during the Victorian era, the existential plight of underprivileged people, and the systemic violence embedded in social structures. Through Dickensian satire, the novel critiques the dehumanization wrought by industrialization while invoking social conscience through humanitarian ideals (Dickens, 1998). Since its introduction to China in the early 20th century, the work's fierce social criticism has resonated deeply with China's modernizing society and its quest for enlightenment, spawning multiple Chinese translations with distinct stylistic approaches. Lin Shu and Wei Yi's collaborative translation *Zei Shi* reimagined the original through the classical prose of the Tongcheng School, establishing the domestication paradigm of Translated novels in the style of Lin Shu. Rong's translation adhered to the principles of faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance, striving to preserve Dickens' realist vigor. The version of He's incorporated contemporary colloquial expressions to enhance readability and public appeal. Spanning nearly a century across three historical phases, from the early 20th century and the reform and opening-up period to the late 20th century, these three translations

reveal divergences in linguistic strategies, ethical orientations, and poetic choices, fundamentally reflecting the dynamic projection of translator subjectivity across cultural contexts. Lin Shu's Sinicization of the Western Knowledge mirrors the cultural adaptation wisdom of literati-officials. Rong's Linguistic Purification aligns with the solemn reception of Western classics after the reform and opening-up period. He's Vernacular Rewriting epitomizes the market-driven logic of literary translation in the consumer age. By comparing the translators' subjective practices in narrative perspective, discursive reconstruction, and cultural filtration, this study aims to demonstrate that translation is not merely linguistic transference but a renegotiation of meaning and power by translators as Cultural Mediators within historical frameworks.

2. The Concept of Translator Subjectivity

As translation studies expanded from the linguistic to the cultural and social dimensions, translator subjectivity emerged as a critical scholarly focus. In traditional translation theory, translators were often viewed as transparent intermediaries tasked with faithfully conveying the content and form of source texts. However, with the cultural turn and the rise of functionalist translation theories, translators were redefined as active agents capable of selection, manipulation, and reconstruction. A Dictionary of Translation Studies in China explains translator subjectivity as the essential characteristics demonstrated by translators in their practice, wherein they dynamically manipulate and transform the source text (as object), externalizing their agency through translation acts. This definition emphasizes that translators are not merely linguistic conveyors but also cultural decoders and reconstructors (Fang, 2003).

3. Three Chinese Translations of *Oliver Twist*

3.1 Lin Shu and Zei Shi

Lin Shu advocated for literature to reflect new ideas, theories, and worlds, dismantle outdated conventions, and advance political, economic, and sociocultural progress, opposing works divorced from reality. His decision to translate Dickens' *Oliver Twist* as *Zei Shi* embodied this philosophy (Lin, 1908). At a time of entrenched social ills and widespread suffering among the underclass, traditional Chinese literature fixated on imperial elites or romantic tales, neglecting the struggles of ordinary people. Lin recognized parallels between Dickens' depiction of London's slums and China's reality at then, which depicts the oppression of workhouses, the plight of orphans, bureaucratic hypocrisy mirrored China's corrupt governance and societal decay. The title *Zei Shi* was not a literal translation but a Confucian historiographical reframing. The term Zei both exposes Oliver's stigmatized social identity and satirizes the systemic injustice that drives the poor to crime. The word Shi elevates the novel to the solemnity of Sima Qian's Records of the Grand Historian, integrating marginalized narratives into China's historiographical tradition (Yu, 2011).

3.2 Rong Ru'de and 奥立弗·退斯特

Rong Ru'de articulated his literary mission through a stark realist lens, dismantling romanticized portrayals of criminality and confront the grim realities of London's underbelly. He criticized earlier works that aestheticized thieves as scarlet-coated figures galloping under moonlight, arguing such narratives obscured social pathologies. Deliberately stripping away any glamorization of crime, Rong's translation analyzed as a image of cold, damp midnight streets, tattered rags, and dens of vice overcrowded with evil, directing attention to corners society refused to acknowledge (Rong, 1984). This kind of translation strategy targeted Victorian hypocrisy—when municipal officials denied the existence of Jacob's Island slums, literature became a tool to expose lies. Rong asserted that systematically exposing criminal ecosystems could force society to confront hidden suffering, interrogating the fractures of modernity through the contradiction between humanity's best and worst. Such a view of literature as a moral autopsy marked the shift of critical realism from aesthetic entertainment to ethical redemption.

3.3 He Wen'an and 雾都孤儿

He Wen'an's 1990s retranslation, 雾都孤儿, intertwined with China's sociocultural transformation and literary marketization. Post-reform economic growth spurred stratified reading demands, shifting literary translation from scholarly enlightenment to market orientation. The title retains 雾都 as a spatial metaphor for industrial London while foregrounding 孤儿 as an emotional touchstone, echoing the loneliness of individuals amid urbanization (He, 1998). He's choices reflect dual contexts. Firstly, it referred to the concession of publishing industry towards the trend of bestsellers under market forces, demanding both literary merit and commercial appeal. Secondly, the underclass narratives emerged into migrant worker influxes and urban-rural divides. Stylistically, He's translation abandons Lin's classical elegance and Rong's academic tone, adopting fluid vernacular and scenographic storytelling to amplify visceral impact. This Vernacular Rewriting reclaims Dickens' ethos of portraying the lower while catering to the light reading preferences of a consumerist era. He's version thus became a milestone in Dickens' localized dissemination, signaling Chinese literary translation's evolution from ideological vehicle to cultural commodity.

4. A Comparative Study of the Chinese Translations by Lin Shu, Rong Ru'de, and He Wen'an

4.1 Translation of Titles

Example 1:

Source text: Oliver Twist

Lin's version: 贼史

Rong's version: 奥立弗·退斯特

He's version: 雾都孤儿

In their approaches to the title, the three translators reveal distinct cultural manipulations shaped by their historical contexts. Lin Shu's 贼史 employs a domestication strategy, stripping the protagonist's name to foreground the moral didacticism of 贼. By grafting the authoritative 史 from traditional Chinese

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historiography, Lin aligns the text with the early 20th century Fiction Revolution, which sought to renew the nation's people through renewing its literature, explicitly encoding social critique (Shen & Kong, 2012). Rong Ru'de's direct transliteration 奥立弗·退斯特 adopts a foreignization strategy, preserving the foreignness of the original name to reflect the 1980s scholarly emphasis on fidelity and respect for the source text's autonomy. He Wen'an's 雾都孤儿 combines geographic imagery (雾都, which can be explained as Foggy City, as a critical metaphor for industrial London) with an identity label (孤儿) to evoke ethical empathy, responding to the 1990s market-driven demand for readability and mass appeal. This evolution, from moral didacticism to a hybrid title balancing geographic and identity markers, epitomizes the historical shift in translator subjectivity: from literature as a moral vehicle to literary autonomy. Lin's choice of Zei exposes the Confucian rectification of names (正名) that violently disciplines texts in premodern translation, while He's dual-naming reflects modernity's pursuit of cultural authenticity and aesthetic loyalty.

4.2 Translation of Sentences

Example 2:

Source text: His features were not naturally intended to wear a smiling aspect, but he was in general rather given to professional jocosity.

Lin's version: 人甚高硕。衣服纯黑固不常笑。恒能爲雅谑。

Rong's version: 他的相貌天生不宜含笑，但总的说来此人颇饶职业的风趣。

He's version: 他那副长相本来就不宜带有轻松愉快的笑意，不过，总的来说，他倒是有几分职业性的诙谐。

Lin's translation dissects the original into three discrete images, 高硕, 纯黑, and 雅谑, conforming to classical Chinese Baimiao (白描) prose. The parallel structure "固…恒…" embeds a rhythmic contrast reminiscent of pianwen (骈文), creating a visual-aural symmetry through 高硕-纯黑-雅谑. In contrast, Rong and He's translations retain the original text framework, which is from negation to concession. Rong condenses the sentence with a single Chinese word 但, which means But, emphasizing professional demeanor, while He extends the sentence with two Chinese words 不过, which also means But, and amplifies irony through adjective modifiers like 轻松愉快的.

Example 3:

Source text: "The prices allowed by the Board are very small, Mr. Bumble." "So are the coffins," replied the beadle, with precisely as near the approach to a laugh as a great official ought to indulge in.

Lin's version: 苏阿白雷曰: "院中人予吾资逾小。" 本特而曰: "汝槽, 亦非大。"

Rong's version: "理事会出的价钱太少了，班布尔先生。" "棺材不是也很小吗？" 干事回答时面带一丝笑意，然而，对这丝笑意他极有控制，以不失其要员身份为度。

He's version: "理事会开的价钱可太小啦，邦布尔先生。" "棺材也是这样的。" 干事答话时面带微笑，这一丝微笑他掌握得恰到好处，以不失教区大员的身份为原则。

Lin omits descriptive details like "with precisely as near the approach to a laugh", focusing on its semantic core, through the triple strategy of deconstructing English compound sentences as image units,

implanting traditional stylistic programs and focusing on the semantic core, the practice of Chinese as the structure at the level of language form is a typical practical manifestation of using Chinese to express English. Rong uses rhetorical questions and clause nesting structures to achieve the purpose of strengthening irony. Rong's rhetorical reconstructions make Bumble's caustic irony more aggressive. The posterior "以不失其要员身份为度" is formed into an independent paragraph by the conditional adverbial clause, forming a binary opposition of "笑意-控制", which highlights the hypocrisy of the bureaucracy through syntactic extension. This strategy makes the institutional critique implicit in the original text explicit, which is in line with the receptive habits of modern Chinese readers. On the other hand, He's version adopts a declarative sentence structure and a linkage structure, which weakens the conflict expressed in the original text to a certain extent. The rear "以不失…为原则" is integrated into the main sentence to form a linear narrative of "面带微笑-掌握-不失身份", so that Bumble's hypocrisy is expressed as a stylized professional ethics rather than an individual moral defect. This syntactic choice weakens Dickens's sharp critique of the bureaucracy and is closer to the mediocre moral judgment system of traditional Zhanghuiti novels.

4.3 Translation of Narrative Perspective

Example 4:

Source text: Wrapped in the blanket which had hitherto formed his only covering, he might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar.

Lin's version: 外史氏曰。天下安有贵贱。别贵贱亦先别之服饰耳。倭利物果以佳毡裹者。谁则言其非贵族之儿。

Rong's version: 本来裹在一条迄今为止是他惟一蔽体之物的毯子里，既可能身为贵胄，也可能是乞丐所生；

He's version: 他打从一出世唯一掩身蔽体的东西就是裹在他身上的那条毯子，你说他是贵家公子也行，是乞丐的贫儿亦可。

By inserting the commentative narrative subject of "外史氏曰", Lin transforms the third-person objective description of the original text into the "史官介入" mode of traditional Chinese narrative. Its added translation "天下安有贵贱。别贵贱亦先别之服饰耳", it also reveals the translator's feelings about the warmth and coldness of human feelings and the turning point of fate. Lin's *Zei Shi* uses the form of "外史氏" to comment on the characters and events in the translation, which is equivalent to assuming that the original work is basically realistic, and the translator is exchanging reading experiences with readers in the capacity of "外史氏". This experience is sometimes a retelling of the original narrator's comments, sometimes mixed with the translator's own comments, which gives the "外史氏" a dual identity: he is both British and Chinese, he narrates British stories and discusses things with traditional Chinese morality, and he is both a translator and a paraphraser. "外史氏" is a hybrid transformed by the translator, playing a dual role. At the same time, "外史氏曰" shows the translator's subjective consciousness, expressing the translator's opinion on a certain event or person or the message they convey to Chinese readers (Ke, 2015). Rong strictly follows the non-focus perspective of the original

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text, retains the narrator's detachment and neutrality with "既可能身为贵胄，也可能是乞丐所生", and maintains the cold texture of realism through neutral words such as "蔽体之物", and its subjectivity is hidden in the pursuit of modernity in linguistic norms. Through the dialogic intervention of the second-person "你说", He translates the universal interrogation implied in the original text into a directional communication gesture for the reader, and the juxtaposition of the elegance and vulgarity of "贵家公子" and "贫儿" not only reflects the populist tendency of contemporary translations, but also partially dissolves the narrative authority due to the change of personal pronouns.

5. The Impact of Translator Subjectivity on Translation Quality

Oliver Twist presents a very different style in the translations of Lin Shu, Rong Ru'de and He Wen'an, which fully demonstrates that the subjectivity of the translator can have different effects on the quality of the translation. Although Lin Shu does not speak English, with other people's help of hand-to-mouth cooperation, he named the whole book as *Zei Shi*, highlighting the strong moral criticism and localization tendency of the early 20th century. He has carried out a large-scale narrative reconstruction of the text, making the translation closer to the expression habits of traditional Chinese novels, enhancing the reader's sense of substitution and cultural identity, and reflecting the strong intervention of the translator. Although this high degree of subjectivity sacrificed part of the linguistic fidelity, it was extremely communicative in the special social and cultural context of the time. In contrast, Rong Ru'de transliterates the name Oliver in the translation, and the language style is standardized and restrained, trying to faithfully present the content and structure of the original work, which reflects the practice of the translation standard of faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance at that time. His translations focus on linguistic equivalence and have high academic rigor and linguistic standardization. He Wen'an's translation chooses a more imagery translation title, which not only conveys the theme of the work, but also enhances cultural associations, showing a more mature reader's awareness and communication strategy. On the basis of being faithful to the original text, he appropriately adjusted the language style and sentence structure, so that the translation was both literary and popular, showing a good balance between subjectivity and normativeness. It can be seen that the subjectivity of the translator not only affects the performance of the translated text in the linguistic and cultural dimensions, but also affects the dissemination and acceptance of the translated text in different eras and readers. The strength of the translator's subjectivity and the way it is expressed directly affect the style, semantic level, and accuracy and depth of cultural communication of the translated text.

6. Conclusion

By comparing the three versions of *Oliver Twist*, this study deeply analyzes the embodiment of translators' subjectivity in translation strategies and translation styles. Lin Shu reconstructs the text with the Confucian view of history, Rong Ru'de defends the original texts with academic loyalty, and He Wen'an balances the elegance and vulgarity with market logic, all of which reflect the cultural demands of

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different eras. Translators should fully demonstrate their subjectivity in translation practice, show their unique charm and increase the diversity of cultural expression by creating translations with personal characteristics.

Project

The Global Imagination of Modern Intellectuals: Cultural Filtering and Ideological Reconstruction in Lin Shu's Translation of *Zei Shi*
Project number: WYX2305

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