

## Original Paper

# A Comparative Study of the Chinese Translations of *The Time Machine* from the Perspective of Chesterman's Translation Ethics—A Case Study of Chen Zhen's and Qing Run's Versions

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### Abstract

Herbert George Wells wrote *The Time Machine*. This book holds an important place in science fiction history. Studying its Chinese translations can show us some rules behind science fiction translation. This paper uses Andrew Chesterman's five models of translation ethics. It compares Chen Zhen's and Qing Run's Chinese versions. The comparison looks at terminology, sentence structure, and character speech styles. Different ethical orientations do affect translators' choices. Chen Zhen's translation leans toward representation and communication ethics. He tries to keep the original's literary quality and intellectual depth. He uses foreignizing strategies more often. Qing Run's translation focuses more on service and norm ethics. He values readability and target readers' habits. He uses domesticating strategies frequently. This study hopes to offer theoretical help for science fiction translation practice. It also tries to broaden the use of translation ethics in literary translation criticism.

### Keywords

Chesterman, translation ethics, *The Time Machine*

## 1. Introduction

Herbert George Wells (1866–1946) is a well-known British novelist. People often call him the “father of science fiction.” His works have both scientific rigor and intellectual depth. They put social criticism into solid scientific ideas. Published in 1895, his masterpiece *The Time Machine* started the important theme of “time travel” in science fiction. It used a future world to criticize the class divisions of Victorian England through metaphor. It offered a dark prediction about the future of human civilization. It is a world classic. It has both social allegorical meaning and literary value. The novel uses a first-person

narrator. It blends scientific, literary, and colloquial language. The dialogues show each character's personality very well. The mix of scientific concepts and literary rhetoric makes translating this novel unique and challenging. Several Chinese translations exist. Chen Zhen's and Qing Run's versions each have distinct features. They provide ideal material for a comparative study from the perspective of translation ethics.

When translating science fiction, the translator should not only accurately convey the scientific concept, but also reproduce the literary quality and ideological depth of the original work. The different ethical tendencies of translators often make the translation present a completely different style. In view of this phenomenon, Andrew Chesterman's translation ethics theory provides a systematic analysis framework. With this framework, it can not only reveal the choices and choices made by translators in actual translation, but also reflect many constraints that translators need to face.

This study aims to conduct a systematic comparative analysis of Chen Zhen's and Qing Run's translations from the perspective of Chesterman's translation ethics, exploring the differences between the two versions and their underlying causes, with a view to offering references for the practice of science fiction translation and further research on translation ethics (Wells, H. G., 2008).

## 2. Models of Translation Ethics

The five models of translation ethics proposed by Chesterman in *Memes of Translation* are not isolated principles but form a hierarchical theoretical system centered on "the translator's relationship with the key elements of translation." The first four ethics correspond to the translator's basic relationships with the source text, the reader, the culture, and the target language norms, while the ethics of commitment serves as an integrative ethic that reconciles potential conflicts among the first four, forming a clear logic of "basic ethics – practical ethics – integrative ethics" that offers a multidimensional and progressive analytical perspective for interpreting translators' strategic choices (Chesterman, 1997).

Reproduction ethics inherits the "faithfulness" principle in traditional translation theory. It values the translator's faithfulness to the original author and the original text. This model holds that the translator's main task is to reproduce the meaning, style and intention of the original text as accurately as possible. Chesterman made clear its core requirements. He said, 'Accurately reproduce the original text, or the original author's intention, without adding, omitting or changing anything'. Reproduction ethics is very important in the translation of science fiction. It can ensure that the original scientific concepts and ideological content are not distorted.

The ethics of service centers on the "service aspect" of translation, defining the translator's duty as serving the reading needs of the target audience. The translator must fully consider the readers' expectations, background knowledge, and comprehension abilities, taking reader acceptance as an important guide to produce a translation that is easy to understand and conforms to the readers' linguistic and aesthetic habits. As Chesterman puts it, the ethics of service "is based on the concept of translation as a commercial service, performed for a client". This ethic is of great significance for the popularization

of science fiction.

The ethics of communication is not just language conversion. It calls translation a cross-cultural communicative action. The translator does the work of cultural intermediary. What translators need to do is not only literal translation; the translator should also be a bridge between the source language culture and the target language culture. Filling cultural vacancies with appropriate strategies and eliminating misunderstandings. These strategies help the two cultures to understand and dialogue with each other. Its core idea is to “emphasize not on behalf of the other, but to communicate with the other” (Chesterman, 2001). Foreign science fiction often has Western cultural elements. Communication ethics is critical to effective cross-cultural communication.

The ethics of norm is based on descriptive translation studies and norm theory, focusing on the relationship between the translator and the linguistic and cultural norms of the target language. It requires the translator to follow the translation norms and linguistic habits of the target culture. Translation is not an isolated linguistic act but a practice situated within a specific target cultural context. The ethics of norm specifies that the translation must conform to the linguistic cognition and reading habits of target readers. Chesterman defines it as “norms specify what is considered acceptable translation”.

Promise ethics occupies the core position in Chesterman’s theoretical system and is also regarded as the highest ethical level. Its definition is the kind of adhesive that binds practitioners with practical values and the virtues of excellence. In translation practice, the first four ethics often conflict with each other. For example, there is a certain tension between the fidelity emphasized by the ethics of representation and the fluency valued by the ethics of service. The ethics of commitment requires the translator to put professional ethics at the center, to weigh and coordinate multiple ethical appeals. These appeals will change with the different types of texts and readers' expectations (Wang Dazhi, 2005). Therefore, the translator should not stick to a certain ethics, but should focus on maximizing the value of translation.

### **3. A Comparative Analysis of the Two Chinese Translations of *The Time Machine* Based on Chesterman’s Models of Translation Ethics**

#### *3.1 Comparison from the Perspective of the Ethics of Representation*

The ethics of representation is central to translating science fiction. It requires the translator to faithfully reproduce the original's meaning, scientific concepts, and core content. The translator must ensure that the work's science fiction features and intellectual depth are not weakened. Chen Zhen's translation strictly follows the core requirements of the ethics of representation. It takes "accurate restoration" as its primary goal. Qing Run's translation makes concessions to reader acceptance. It sacrifices some accuracy of the original. It prioritizes the ethics of service over the ethics of representation. The comparison below covers two dimensions: technical terminology and core metaphors.

#### **Example 1**

Original: “There are really four dimensions, three which we call the three planes of Space, and a fourth, Time.”

Chen's translation: “的确有四个维度，前三个我们称之为‘空间’的三个平面，而第四维就是时间。”

Qing's translation: “其实有四维空间，其中三维我们称为空间的三个平面，第四维就是时间。”

“Dimensions” is a core technical term in *The Time Machine*. It relates directly to the central premise of “time as the fourth dimension.” The accuracy of its translation determines how well the original's core scientific concept is conveyed. Chen translates it as *weidu* (维度), the standard professional term in mathematics and science fiction. This translation is faithful to the original meaning; it accurately conveys the scientific implication that time is the fourth dimension, independent of space; it keeps terminological consistency throughout the text; it strictly follows the ethics of representation. Qing adopts a free translation, merging the term into *wei kongjian* (维空间) meaning “dimensional space.” This reduces comprehension difficulty for ordinary readers; it narrows the abstract concept of “dimension” to “space”; it sacrifices terminological precision; it weakens the original's core sci-fi premise. This is a concession to the ethics of representation.

#### Example 2

Original: “He struck me as being a very beautiful and graceful creature, but indescribably frail. His flushed face reminded me of the more beautiful kind of consumptive — that hectic beauty of which we used to hear so much.”

Chen's translation: “他给我的感觉是俊美而优雅，却脆弱得难以名状。他那泛红的脸颊，让我联想到那种格外动人的肺结核患者——也就是我们常听闻的那种狂热的病态之美。”

Qing's translation: “他给我的深刻印象是非常漂亮优雅，但又脆弱得难以言表。他发红的面容使我想起了更加漂亮的肺病患者——就是我们过去经常听说的那种肺病美人。”

The portrayal of the Ilois in the work is a key social metaphor. It carries Wells' criticism of the degeneration of civilization, and the core of this metaphor lies in the 'busy beauty' (or 'morbid beauty of fever'). On the one hand, this beauty highlights the external perception, on the other hand, it also exposes the inner spiritual emptiness. Chen Zhen's translation completely restores the connotation of this metaphor. He uses "tuberculosis patient" to correspond to the original term, and uses "feverish morbid beauty" to retain the ideological tension of "fever," so that readers can perceive the social criticism of the original work and meet the requirements of reproduction ethics. In contrast, Qing's translation simplifies those expressions into "lung patients" and "lung beauty," which loses the core meaning of "radical" and reduces a complex social metaphor to a simple superposition of "beauty and disease." This not only weakens the ideological depth of the original work, but also weakens the strength of the ethics of reproduction in essence, and tends to be service ethics.

#### 3.2 Comparison from the Perspective of the Ethics of Service

The ethics of service focuses on the target readers' reading experience, requiring the translator to adjust sentence structures and language using domesticating strategies to enhance readability and acceptability. Qing Run's translation takes the ethics of service as an important guide, fully aligning with the expression habits of Chinese readers. Chen Zhen's translation, in order to preserve the original style, places less

emphasis on the ethics of service. The comparison is made below in terms of sentence structure and character language.

#### Example 3

Original: "I suppose a suicide who holds a pistol to his skull feels much the same wonder at what will come next as I felt then."

Chen's translation: "我想, 一个举枪对着自己脑袋的自杀者, 对接下来会发生什么事的感觉, 大概就跟我当时的感受差不多。"

Qing's translation: "我想我当时感觉很像一个举枪对着脑壳自杀的人, 不知道下面会发生什么。"

The English attributive clause "who holds a pistol to his skull" is rendered in Chen's translation as a premodifier "举枪对着自己脑袋的自杀者," creating a longer modifying element that, while retaining the original's nested structure, results in a somewhat heavier reading rhythm. Qing's translation adopts a splitting strategy: the modifier becomes "举枪对着脑壳自杀的人" (a person who commits suicide by holding a pistol to his head), and "what will come next" is converted into the independent clause "不知道下面会发生什么" (not knowing what will happen next), making the translation more in line with the "run-on sentence" characteristic of Chinese. From the perspective of the ethics of service, Qing's translation pays more attention to the target readers' reading experience.

#### Example 4

Original: "'Story be damned!' said the Time Traveler. 'I want something to eat.'"

Chen's translation: "'去他的故事!' 时间旅行者说, '我想吃点东西。'"

Qing's translation: "'让故事见鬼去吧!' 时间旅行家说, '我想要点儿东西吃。'"

The original line is a spoken curse from the Time Traveler. It shows his annoyance and resistance. The translation needs to fit Chinese spoken habits. Chen's version "去他的故事" shows the emotion. It is rather flat. It does not have much force in Chinese spoken language. Qing's version "让故事见鬼去吧" is a common curse phrase in Chinese. It gives the character's emotion accurately and vividly. Adding "点儿" makes the food request sound more natural in spoken Chinese. The character's language becomes more localized. This helps reader immersion. This is a typical case of the ethics of service in translating character language.

### 3.3 Comparison from the Perspective of the Ethics of Communication

The ethics of communication focuses on the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication, requiring the translator to facilitate mutual understanding between the source and target cultures. For *The Time Machine*, which contains Western cultural elements, the handling of culture-specific items is a key site for practicing this ethic. Qing's and Chen's translations represent two approaches to the ethics of communication: Qing adopts "cultural adaptation," using footnotes to fill cultural gaps; Chen adopts "cultural transmission," using foreignization to preserve source cultural traits. Both are consistent with their own reader assumptions (Fang Mengzhi, 2011).

#### Example 5

Original: "One might travel back and verify the accepted account of the Battle of Hastings, for instance!"

Chen's translation: “譬如，他可以穿越回去，核实史书上关于黑斯廷斯战役的记述！”

Qing's translation: “比如，他可以回到过去核实公认的黑斯廷斯战役的记述！”

(Translation of footnote: “The Battle of Hastings, fought on October 14, 1066, between the Anglo-Saxon army of King Harold Godwinson of England and the army of William, Duke of Normandy, in the Hastings area, ending in William the Conqueror's victory. This battle is also regarded as the beginning of the High Middle Ages in Europe.”)

For British readers, the Battle of Hastings (1066) is a universal historical fact that needs no more explanation, but Chinese readers often lack in-depth understanding of British history, so this term is only an empty proper name for them. Chen's translation does not add any explanation, which means that the default reader already has the relevant background knowledge, while Qing's translation gives a footnote, which lists the key information of the date, the two sides of the war and the historical importance. This treatment looks like an 'addition', but it just implements the communicative ethics very well, because the footnote can help readers understand the context in which the story occurs, and this context is precisely the most exciting place to look at historical events through time travel, so as to eliminate the cultural distance and effectively convey the information of the source culture. It can be seen that the translator pursues 'communication' rather than 'reproduction'.

### 3.4 Comparison from the Perspective of the Ethics of Norm

The ethics of norm requires the translation to follow the linguistic norms and cognitive habits of the target language, forming the basis of “acceptability.” Both Chen's and Qing's translations follow basic Chinese norms, but their approaches differ: Chen's translation is “norm adaptation under semantic faithfulness,” adapting to Chinese norms while restoring the original meaning; Qing's translation is “norm adaptation under reader cognition,” adapting to Chinese norms while aligning with readers' cognitive expectations. The comparison is made below in terms of word order and character appellation.

#### Example 6

Original: “It is a law of nature we overlook, that intellectual versatility is the compensation for change, danger, and trouble.”

Chen's translation: “但我们忽略了一条自然法则，那就是多样性的智慧是对变化、危险和麻烦的补偿。”

Qing's translation: “这是我们没有注意的一条自然法则，也就是多方面的才智是对变化、危险和麻烦进行的补偿。”

Chinese is a topic-prominent language. It likes to put given or background information at the start. Chen's translation “但我们忽略了一条自然法则……” follows this rule exactly. The “overlooked fact” is placed first as the topic; the specific content comes after. This makes the logic clear; it fits Chinese readers' cognitive habits. Qing's translation mostly keeps the original inverted order. The original is “This is a natural law we have not noticed”. This does not break basic Chinese rules; it is a little less smooth in information flow. The translation of “intellectual versatility” as “多方面的才智” weakens the semantic nuance of the original.

## Example 7

Original: “The Time Traveler”

Chen’s translation: “时间旅行者”

Qing’s translation: “时间旅行家”

In Chinese, the difference between “者” and “家” shows different ethical choices. The suffix “者” points to the doer of an action. Examples are “reader” and “author”. The suffix “家” points to a professional identity. Examples are “scientist” and “artist”. In the novel, “Time Traveler” has two meanings. One is a behavioral description. It means a person who travels through time. The other is an identity marker. It means the inventor of *The Time Machine*. Chen’s translation “旅行者” focuses on the behavior itself. It stays closer to the literal meaning of the original. Qing’s translation “旅行家” focuses on professional identity. It fits Chinese readers’ expectation of an “inventor” better. Under the ethics of norm, Qing’s translation adapts better to Chinese naming habits. Chen’s translation stays more faithful to the original meaning. This difference shows a trade-off between two normative orientations. Chen follows a norm that puts semantic priority first. Qing follows a norm that puts cultural adaptation first.

### 3.5 Comprehensive Comparison from the Perspective of the Ethics of Commitment

The duty of commitment ethics is to bring different ethical models together and coordinate them. When translators face ethical conflicts, they need to make responsible professional judgments. Their subjectivity and professional integrity are also reflected in this process; it can be seen from the previous analysis that Chen Zhen’s translation gives priority to representational ethics and communicative ethics, tries to faithfully reproduce the literariness and ideological depth of the original work, and uses foreignization strategy to convey exotic cultural information, while Qing Run’s translation is biased towards service ethics and normative ethics, paying more attention to fluency and readers’ acceptance. However, the ethics of commitment reminds us that these tendencies are not absolutely opposite. In actual translation practice, any excellent translator needs to dynamically reconcile those conflicting ethical demands, which is precisely where the translator’s subjectivity and professional judgment play a role (Sun Zhili, 2007).

## Example 8

Original: “The little machine suddenly swung round, became indistinct, was seen as a ghost for a second perhaps, as an eddy of faintly glittering brass and ivory; and it was gone — vanished!”

Chen’s translation: “那台小机器突然旋转起来，变得模糊不清，有一秒钟的工夫，它像幽灵一样，又像一团泛着微光的黄铜和象牙的漩涡；接着它就消失了——无影无踪！”

Qing’s translation: “那台小机器突然转动起来，渐渐变得模糊，大概转眼间在视野里就成了叠影，犹如闪着微光的黄铜和象牙旋出的涡流。它飘然而去——突然不见了！”

Faced with the key metaphor “seen as a ghost,” Chen’s translation retains the defamiliarizing image of “ghost,” adhering to the ethics of representation. At the same time, he uses concrete words like “eddy” and “vanished without a trace” to enhance visual imagery and literariness, thus also accommodating the ethics of norm (since Chinese values vivid imagery). Qing’s translation transforms “ghost” into the more

accessible “double image,” directly reflecting the ethics of service, while using the phrase “drifted away” — an expression rich in Chinese poetic aesthetics — as a positive application of the ethics of norm. Neither translator goes to an extreme: Chen does not produce a completely awkward sentence for the sake of fidelity, and Qing does not entirely delete the sense of “illusory/unreal” implied by “ghost” for the sake of fluency. Each finds what they consider the most appropriate balance between “reproducing the original’s core image” and “adapting to target readers’ cognition.”

#### 4. Conclusion

Using Chesterman’s theory of translation ethics as a framework, this study conducted a comparative analysis of Chen Zhen’s and Qing Run’s Chinese translations of *The Time Machine* and draws the following conclusions: Chen Zhen’s translation, published in Yilin Press’s “Bilingual Yilin” series with the positioning of “reproducing a literary classic,” prioritizes the ethics of representation and the ethics of communication, adopts foreignizing strategies, and strives to be faithful to the original’s literariness and intellectual depth in the translation of technical terms, scientific concepts, and core metaphors. It is more suitable for readers who seek a high degree of fidelity to the literary classic. Qing Run’s translation, published in Donghua University Press’s “Exploration and Classic Literature Bilingual Series” with the positioning of “bilingual learning for all tastes,” is guided by the ethics of service and the ethics of norm, frequently employs domesticating strategies, and enhances readability and reader acceptance through syntactic splitting and linguistic adaptation. It is more suitable for readers who value reading experience and bilingual learning. The differences in ethical orientation and translation strategies between the two versions essentially stem from their different publication positioning and assumed readerships (Shen Lianyun, 2008).

Both translations make responsible choices under the ethics of commitment. Chen tries to be faithful to the original; he cares about readability. Qing meets readers’ needs; he shares cultural information. Both translations find a good balance among different ethical demands. This shows that translating science fiction needs to balance different ethics based on the text’s position. Translators must balance scientific accuracy and readability. They should think about the text’s features, the readers, and the publication context. They can change their strategies. They should keep the original’s core meaning (Xu Jun, 2003). This study enriches how translation ethics theory is applied in science fiction translation criticism. It gives a reference for translating similar texts. Future research could enlarge the sample by including more translations. Empirical methods could be used. These methods would help explore ethics in science fiction translation more deeply.

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