THEORETICAL TRIADS IN CHINESE THINKING OVER TRANSLATION

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ABSTRACT

Theoretical triads are commonly employed thought patterns and have played an important part in the history of translation. This paper presents a brief introduction to some of the most prominent triads in Chinese thinking over translation and clarifies the misinterpretations of them, with some of their Western counterparts given for comparative purpose. The triads covered include "faithfulness, expressiveness, elegance" proposed by Yan Fu, "sublimation, deviation, and mediation" by Qian Zhongshu, and "semantic beauty, phonological beauty, structural beauty" by Xu Yuanchong.

Keywords: Triads, Thought Pattern, Comparison, Translation Studies.

INTRODUCTION

In the history of translation there is an intriguing and enigmatic phenomenon: traditional translation theories usually fall into triads – be they about the types, standards or strategies of translation. The renowned examples include the triad of faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance projected by Yan Fu in China and that of metaphrase, paraphrase, and imitation formulated by Dryden in the West, to name just two. These triads, primarily concerned with textual elements in translation, generally don't take into account the contextual factors like ideology, politics, gender, power, and therefore may seem too short-sighted today to some translation theorists. But they have nevertheless played an extremely important role in helping us to understand the nature of translation from the linguistic and aesthetic perspective, and the priority they give to the transference of meaning and poetic features of the original carries weight even today. This paper is an attempt to give a brief survey of these theoretical triads in translation studies in China, but examples of similar thought pattern in Western translation history are to be given as well for the purpose of comparison.

1. Triad: A Favorite Chinese Way to Perceive the World

George Steiner said in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation:* "When it is analyzing complex structures, thought seem to favor triads." (Steiner, 2001:266) What Steiner says here is true not only of the thinking pattern in the West, but also of that in China; and it applies not only to translation theories, but also to theories in logics, history and even physics. The philosophical base underlying this thought pattern is still a black box, the decoding and interpretation of which depends as much on speculation and genius as on efforts. So the search for the root cause of this phenomenon is likely to be more frustrating than fertile for the moment, given the heterogeneous nature of the triads themselves and their intrinsic links with respective cultural matrixes. A tentative discussion of them based on Chinese sayings, idioms and philosophy, however, may lift the curtain a little bit so that we can have a better view of this familiar yet mysterious thought pattern.

Laozi (Lao Tzu) (571-471 BC), one of the most famous philosophers in ancient China, said in his masterpiece, *The Book of Tao and Teh (Tao Te Ching)*, "Tao begets the One; the One gives birth to the Two (the Ying and Yang); the Two generates the Three; and from the Three all things of the world spring." (Chapter 42) Thus the origin of the cosmos is Tao, but ultimately only by means of the Three can Tao be activated. So the Three is the natural development of Taoism and the embodiment of the whole universe.

There has been so far no in-depth research into the link between the "Three" in Taoism and the various usages of the number "three" in the Chinese language and culture, but a close review of them reveals that they do illuminate one another to some extent. Examples of their connection abound. *"San ren cheng hu,"* for example, roughly means "if three people say there is a tiger, others will believe there is

one though it's unlikely to be true". This Chinese idiom cautions that a rumor widely circulated may turn into a fact. Here "san", meaning literally "three" in Chinese, says more than the exact number itself; it is as good as saying "many" or " a lot of", as in the phrase "from the Three all things of the world spring" in *The Book of Tao and Teh* where the "Three" transcends its literal sense and symbolizes the embryo of the world.

If *"san"* (three) can signify "many" as is shown in the last example, it can mean "few" as well in some circumstances. Confucius once said of his humble attitude in learning: "Among three people walking together one of them is surely qualified as my teacher". The sentence says about the importance of having a receptive mind in learning from different sources, and "three" is close to "as few as three".

The fact that "three" is widely used in Chinese idioms in particular and in the Chinese language in general, and that it can transcend its literal meaning may explain why thinking in triad pervades in Chinese culture. This is at once a concise and holistic thought pattern, in the light of which the complex world tends to become more ordered and more accessible. In whatever field it is used, this pattern is efficient, readily accepted and even appreciated. The following example serves as a good illustration.

By borrowing some beautiful lines from classic Chinese poems, Wang Guowei (1877—1927), a distinguished scholar in Qing Dynasty, suggested that men of great accomplishment often undergo three stages or realms (*jing jie* in Chinese) on their way towards success – The first stage is like mounting a lofty tower on a windy lonely night, with leaves withering and falling around and many risks lying ahead, the second is like becoming emaciated for one's sweetheart but showing no regret in being so overwhelmed by lovesickness, and the third is like finding one's true love unexpectedly after many times of frustration in pursuing. The figurative descriptions of the three realms of success in the tone of a lover preoccupied with love, if put in plain English, can be paraphrased like this: those who have set their minds to success often have to suffer loneliness and pain before the final goal is reached – somewhat unexpectedly. In other words, what seems to be an easily achieved accomplishment is in fact the result of painstaking efforts.

2. Theoretical Triads in Chinese Thinking Over Translation

To have a better view of theoretical triads in Chinese thinking over translation, we'll start with a brief coverage of this thought pattern in the West. This is not just because translation studies in its modern sense has its origin in the West, but also because a comparative view will shed more light on what has been happening in translation studies in China, which has only recently caught up with the tide in the field of translation in the West.

Theoretical triads occurred in the West as early as the twelfth century and were attributed to an anonymous commentator (Robinson, 1997:43). A most recent triad was put forward by Gideon Toury in his discussion of translation norms, but he used another term "tripartite" instead of triad. He said translation norms could be divided into three categories: basic (primary) norms, secondary norms (tendencies), tolerated (permitted) behavior (Toury, 2000:208). But it is George Steiner who first discussed in depth the theoretical triads in translation studies. The examples Steiner cited include the triad of metaphrase, paraphrase, and imitation formulated by Dryden, the triad of mediation, parody, and metamorphosis by Goethe, and the triad of intralingual translation (rewording), interlingual translation (translation proper), and transmutation (intersemiotic translation) by Roman Jakobson. In the famous triple scheme proposed by Dryden paraphrase is believed to be the right approach to translation, i.e. the translator should aim for the middle ground or trace a via media between the word-for-word approach and the wild idiosyncrasies (Steiner, 2001:267). Goethe's framework is different in that it takes on some philosophical flavor, hence more difficult to understand. The ideal state of translation, according to Goethe, is the third and also the loftiest mode of metamorphosis, which integrates the foreign and the native, the known and the unknown harmoniously. Roman Jakobson's triadic system is far more comprehensive in scope than either Dryden's or Goethe's scheme. In Jakobson ambitious framework, translation is not just carrying over meaning from one language to another; it is "the perpetual, inescapable condition of signification"

(Steiner, 2001:267). By broadening the traditional meaning of translation, Jakobson touches upon a significant fact that is often neglected or taken for granted: if synonyms inside a certain language are rarely complete equivalence, how could there be an equivalence between languages?

Another often quoted translation triad in the West is proposed by Tytler: The translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work; the style and manner of writing should be of the same character with that of the original; the translation should have all the ease of original composition (Tytler, 1907:9). As pointed out by Tytler, to keep the original ideas the translator often has to depart from the original style and tone, and it's the translator's priority to be concerned with ideas, even at the cost of styles. This is not to say that keeping the original style is unimportant, or to deny the fact that the translator has the poetic license in terms of style when translating. It just highlights the overriding importance of ideas, and cautions against excessively-done free translation. Tytler's theoretical triad, together with his other expounding on translation and the role of translators, is an epoch-making theory in the history of translation in the West (Tan, 2004:132).

2.1 Yan Fu's Theoretical Triad: Faithfulness, Expressiveness and Elegance

Tytler's triad is often studied in comparison with its Chinese counterpart, the triad of *xin* (faithfulness), *da* (expressiveness), and *ya* (elegance) projected by Yan Fu. Though the two do overlap to some extent, they are not exactly the same. Tytler's first and third rules correspond to Yan Fu's first and second standards respectively, but Tytler's second rule differs from Yan's third standard so greatly that they may be considered to be oriented towards two opposite directions. For Tytler the style of the translation should be the same as or imitation of that of the original; for Yan the translator should aim for elegant or graceful style of the translation regardless of what the original style might be. Yan's triad has long been the guideline of translation practice in China and has almost been deified. Doubts and even criticisms of his third standard, however, do crop up. The ready counter-attack could be this: why should the translation be elegant if the original is vulgar?

That Yan Fu should put forward such a controversial standard could be better understood and accepted if we take into account his purpose in the translation and nature of the works he translated. His translation project, beginning with the translation of *Evolution and Ethics and other Essays* by Thomas H. Huxley, was set to introduce Western thoughts, culture and political system to China, then a backward agrarian country. Yan's pursuit of elegance by using classical Chinese immersed his translation in a kind of archaism, which was to the taste of the intellectuals and government officials, the target reader of his translation. It was these people that Yan believed should first of all be informed about the Western thoughts. Yan Fu's use of *ya* (elegance) in his triad is also an indication of the importance attached to form in Chinese translation tradition.

It can be seen from the above discussion that an ideal translation for Tytler is a complete copy of the original in another language and should not read like a translation. Translation is done with the original as the center and the final judge. In Western tradition "the translation never really stands as a text on its own, with rare exceptions, and the translator always has to look over his or her shoulder at the original". (Bassnett & Lefevere, 2001:23) In Yan Fu's scheme, which also attaches importance to faithfulness, the translator is grants more freedom to move a bit away from the original in pursuing other goals of translation, often with a certain audience in mind. This difference well refutes earlier speculation that Yan borrowed his ideas from Tytler. Yan's *xin, da, ya*, if traced to their origin, are actually from the writings on translation of Buddhism in ancient times. But it is Yan who put them in a systematic triad. In fact, according to Qian Zhongshu, an erudite Chinese scholar, "the nearest approach to Tytler's theory in Chinese is perhaps the one advocated by Ma Jianzhong [1], author of the famous *Chinese Grammar.*" (Qian, 2005:41) Ma believed there should not be even a hair's breadth of difference between the original and the translation, with the latter just mirroring the former. But there is no evidence to show that Ma derived his ideas from Tytler. The coincidence may be explained with the time-honored proverb: "Great minds think alike".

Both Tytler and Yan are key figures in the history of translation, but there is no comparison between them in terms of their status in translation studies today. In the West the various "turns", be they about cultural turn, translation turn or translator's turn, have swept Tytler's triad almost into oblivion. But in China, for all the introduction of translation theories of the West, Yan's triad, among few other native Chinese theories, still enjoys a relatively safe place in translation studies, defying all doubts, even attacks from some Chinese translation theorists. This may be explained in the light of the fact that the Chinese attach more importance to practice than in theory, a phenomenon found not just in the field of translation but in other fields of the humanities as well. Yan's three-character triad, compact and conventional, is still considered to be valuable by many Chinese translation practitioners and theorists, especially by those who believe that too much preoccupation with theoretical research will be a hindrance to the pursuit of high-quality translation and the broadened landscape of translation studies may do more harm than good to this newly-established discipline.

That Yan Fu's three-character principle is still valued today does not rule out the fact that it has been criticized all along. Liu Zhongde[2], for one, is among the translation theorists who have expressed disapproval of and made some constructive comments on Yan's third point in the triad. Liu speaks highly of Yan's contribution both in translation theory and practice, but nevertheless points out Yan's limitation in including *ya* (elegance) in the triad. In Liu's point of view, Yan's use of classical Chinese to pursue elegance demonstrates that he was rather conservative on the question of language. Modern Chinese vernacular is expressive enough to be used in translation and the works Yan translated are written in modern English, so there is no need to resort to classical Chinese (Liu, 1991:21). Liu further suggested that *ya* in Yan's triad be replaced by *qie* (closeness or correspondence in style with the original), hence his new theoretical triad: *xin, da, qie*. Liu's triad, by removing the controversial *ya,* has a more universal appeal, and is more widely applicable and safer from criticism. But his new three-character principle is by no means an attempt to deny Yan's merit; it is at its most a modification of instead of a departure from Yan's triad.

2.2 Lin Yutang's Theoretical Triad: Faithfulness, Expressiveness and Beauty

Another well-known theoretical triad that bears similarity to the triad of Yan Fu is introduced by Lin Yutang[3], an important figure in modern China in terms of introducing Chinese culture to the West. Lin's influence lies mainly in his English works about China and Chinese culture, but his translations are also considered by many to be the classics in the Chinese history of translation. Lin's triad also includes faithfulness and expressiveness, but where Yan aims for elegance Lin puts in artistic beauty instead. Lin holds that literary translation is a pursuit of artistic beauty, and the translator should approach translation like dealing with a fine art. When translating literary works the translator should pay attention not only to what is said but also to how it is said (Luo Xinzhang, 1984:430). In a word, Lin's triad of "faithfulness, expressiveness, and artistic beauty" is especially relevant to literary translation.

2.3 Qian Zhongshu's Theoretical Triad: Sublimation, Deviation, and Mediation

Among those Chinese scholars who have conceived translation triads that differ widely from that of Yanfu are Qian Zhongshu (1910-1998) and Xu Yuanchong[4] (1921-), the former being a legendary figure in modern Chinese academia, and the latter a renowned translator. A brief discussion of their triads is given respectively here.

Qian Zhongshu is best remembered in the field of translation as the advocate of *Huajing* theory (sublimation or the acme of perfection). While Qian's chief academic interest is in ancient Chinese literature and Western literature, rather than translation studies, his sublimation theory has been frequently quoted and intensively discussed, culminating the three time-honored standards in the development of translation history in China – hence the famous quartet: literalness, faithfulness, spiritual similarity, and sublimation (*Huajing*). There's no denying that sublimation theory fit in well with the general milieu of translation studies in China in the last century, when faithfulness was the order of the day, and provided much inspiration, if not guidance, for translators and translation theorists alike. To say sublimation is a standard for translation set by Qian Zhongshu, however, is misleading, and to

summarize Qian Zhongshu's translation thoughts in a single term "sublimation" misses the gem of his thoughts.

It is in "Lin Shu's Translation",[5] one of the few papers written by Qian Zhongshu and devoted to the discussion of translation, and thus an important source to an understanding of Qian's translation thoughts, that *Huajing* was first introduced. The paper has since been widely cited for its Huajing theory. But detailed reading indicates that *Huajing* is not conveyed to the reader as a criterion in literary translation. Rather, it's put forward as a lofty ideal, and as one of the three conceptions reviewed together by Qian in his paper, the other two being deviation and mediation (respectively *E* and *Mei* in Chinese). In fact the focus of the paper is not about how to achieve *Huajing* in translation, but on the three types of deviation in Lin Shu's translations and the intermediary role his translations played between English literature and Chinese literature. (Qian, 2002:77-114) These two points have long been neglected, as they do not fit in with the general atmosphere in translation studies in China where the pursuit of faithfulness has been given overriding significance. It is only at the turn of the 21st century that more Chinese translation practitioners and theorists begin to look beyond the text towards the context and to see the impossibility of absolute faithfulness as an integrate part of translations.

"Lin Shu's Translation" is not prescriptive by nature as is widely believed. We may safely say that Qian takes a descriptive stance on translation in general and on Lin Shu's translation in particular, behind which lay his profound understanding of and an open mind towards translation. And we may as well draw the conclusion that Qian Zhongshu's translation thoughts should be understood as a triad formed by sublimation, deviation, and mediation – rather than sublimation alone. The supporting evidence can be found both in the paper and in Qian's related discussions on translation in other writings.

That Qian Zhongshu does not dwell on sublimation before moving on to the discussion of treason and intermediary in "Lin Shu's Translation" does not mean that he thinks sublimation is insignificant and this ideal is not worth pursuing. In fact Qian touches upon this topic in another article entitled "On Transparency" (*Lun Buge* in Chinese), in which he thinks that there should be no mist or opaqueness, usually produced by the translator's style, between the original and the translation (Qian, 2002:110). So what Qian depicts through the triad in "Lin Shu's Translation" and his other pithy comments is a comprehensive picture of translation where a lofty ideal, unavoidable imperfection, and intercommunication between different cultures coexist. Qian's triad looks beyond the text by taking into account the intermediary or social role of translation, and is thus an epoch-making page in Chinese history of translation studies.

2.4 Xu Yuanchong's Theoretical Triad: Three Elements of Beauty

Xu Yuanchong's triad, usually called "the principle of three elements of beauty", is mainly concerned with how to achieve beauty in the translation of poetry. Specifically put, it requires that translation of poetry should be beautiful in three aspects – semantically, phonologically and structurally. Xu's triad has been warmly praised and keenly followed by some Chinese translation theorists and practitioners because it is a native-born principle. What makes his triad especially appealing is that Xu frequently belittles Western translation theories and ridicules the mistakes made by Western translators when translating Chinese classics. In a country where translation studies generally depend on theories borrowed from the West, Xu's theoretical triad and his defiance of what is Western serve as a source of confidence and pride for some Chinese translators and researchers.

Xu attaches overriding importance to the use of rhyming in his translation because he thinks this is the most effective means to achieve beauty in poetry, and the pursuit of beauty should be the translator's sacred duty. However, his preoccupation with phonological beauty, together with his English translation of classical Chinese poems under the guidance of this principle, incurs severe criticism from those Chinese translators and theorists who believe excessive concern over the rhyming of poetry will do more harm than good to both the writing and translation of poetry. He was accused of deforming the meaning to cater to the need of rhyming in poetry translation. Xu is destined to be among the most controversial figures in the field of translation in

China, with his contribution in translating Chinese literature and culture to the West on one hand and his excessive concern with rhyming in his translations on the other.

Conclusion

The theoretical triads in Chinese thinking over translation are deeply rooted in Chinese philosophy and culture, and have been providing invaluable guidance for translation practice in China. Like their Western counterparts, they are an improvement over the binary division between literal and liberal, word-for-word and sense-for-sense translation. But unlike their counterparts that have more or less become obsolete, they are still being discussed and are even seen in the spotlight sometimes. While translation studies in China are in general, following the Western trend, i.e. to be moving away from the analysis of text to the examination of context, many Chinese translators hold that a complete negligence of text is unwise and detrimental to translation studies in the long run and thus suggest a resurrection of textual study. This probe into the theoretical triads in Chinese thinking is an attempt in this direction, not to change the trend, but to strike a balance between the study of text and the examination of context.

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Notes

[1]. Ma Jianzhong（马建忠）（1845-1900)：A diplomat and scholar in late Qing Dynasty. He studied in France for three years and had a good command of French, English and some other foreign languages. He also compiled the first comprehensive Chinese Grammar book.

[2]. Liu Zhongde（刘重德）（1914-2008)：A translation theorist and long time professor of English and translation in Hunan University, China.

[3]. Lin Yutang（林语堂）（1895-1976)：A Chinese writer, translator and linguist. His compilations and translations of classical Chinese works into English had a wide readership in the West. Among his translations are Selected Poems and Prose of Su Tungpo and Six Chapters of a Floating Life.

[4]. Xu Yuanchong（许渊冲）（1921-)：A distinguished translator and translation theorist in contemporary China. He is also a controversial figure in the field of translation

because of his unconventional translation method and his overuse of rhyming in his translation of Chinese poetry. He won the FIT "Aurora Borealis" Prize for Outstanding Translation of Fiction Literature in 2004.

[5]. Lin Shu (林纾) (1852 – 1924): A writer and translator, the first Chinese, who translated Western novels. He did not know any foreign language and his translation was his re-creation based on the oral description of the original by his assistants who happened to know the language in question. For this reason, deviations and examples of mistranslation were not uncommon in his translations and he was sometimes criticized by some conventional translators. But there is no denying that his translations were very popular, when he was at his early translation career, and had a great influence on many modern Chinese scholars in the first half of the 20th century.

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