

A Commentary on English Translation of “Wen Fu”

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Abstract—Since the middle of the 20th century, “Wen Fu” has been translated into the Western world by many Chinese and foreign translators, which vastly promoted the spread and acceptance of ancient Chinese literary theory in the West and was of great significance to facilitate the exchange and cooperation between Chinese and foreign academic circles on the study of “Wen Fu”. By the comparison of Sam Hamill’s and Stephen Owen’s English versions of “Wen Fu”, this paper is designed to explore the translators’ translation purpose, analyze the differences in translation strategies, and expound the discrepancies in word selection so as to extend the existing studies of “Wen Fu”.

Index Terms—“Wen Fu”, English translation of classics, Sam Hamill, Stephen Owen

I. INTRODUCTION

“Wen Fu” was written by Lu Ji, a litterateur in the western Jin dynasty. It is the first monograph of traditional Chinese literary theory in the history to systematically discuss the essential characteristics of literature, especially the problems of literary creation. Qian Zhongshu once said in *The Pipe and Awl Collection*, “‘Wen Fu’ is not a style of writing but the composition itself” (Qian Zhongshu, 1979, p.1206). It was highly commented as a connecting link between the Cao Pi’s Classical Treatise: *On Literary Writing* and Liu Xie’s *Mind of Literature and Carving Dragons* (Zhang Shaokang, 2002, p.12).

Since 1948, there have been nine English versions of “Wen Fu”, these versions are as followed: “An English Version of the ‘Essay on Literature’ ” of Shih Hsiang Chen (1912-1971) compiled by Peking University in 1948; “A Poem on Writing” of Zhou Ruchang published by *Studia Serica*; “The Art of Letters. Lu Chi’s ‘Wen Fu’ A. D. 302. A Translation and Comparative Study” of Ernest Richard Hughes (1883-1956), a British sinologist, published by *Pantheon Books* in 1951; “Rhymeprose on Literature. The Wên-Fu of Lu Chi (A. D. 261-303) ” of Achilles Fang(1910-1995) published on *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* in 1951; “A Descriptive Poem on Literature” of the Hong Kong scholar Sui kit Wong published on *Early Chinese Literary Criticism* in 1983; “Lu Chi: Wen Fu (‘The Art of Writing’) ” of American poet Sam Hamill published by the *The American Poetry Review* in 1986; “The Poetic Exposition on Literature” of Stephen Owen (1946-), an American sinologist, published on *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* in 1992; “Rhapsody on Literature” of David R. Knechtges, an American sinologist, published on *Wen Xuan. Or Selections of Refined Literature* in 1996; “The Art of Writing: Teaching of Chinese Masters” of American poet Tony Barnstone (1961-) and Stanford University Ph.D. Chou Ping published in 1996.

The author will compare the Sam Hamill’s version (hereinafter referred to as the version H) published on the Library of Chinese Classics with Stephen Owen’s version (hereinafter referred to as the version O) published by the Harvard University press, and expound the rationality of the diversity of the translations of “Wen Fu” from the aspects of translation purposes, translation strategies and differences in word selection.

II. SAM HAMILL’S AND STEPHEN OWEN’S ENGLISH VERSIONS OF “WEN FU”

Sam Hamill is an American poet, translator and publisher. In 1986, he published “Lu Chi: Wen Fu (‘the art of writing’)” in the *American Poetry Review*, and in 1987, he published “Wen Fu: The Art of Writing” on *Breitenbush Books*, which is a postscript about Lu Ji’s life experience and his compositions. It was reprinted by Malijin Publishing Company in 1991 with an introduction. And “The Art of Writing: Teaching of Chinese Masters” was included in *Zhong Hua Wen Ku* (namely Chinese library) in 2012.

Sam Hamill claimed that he knew nothing about Chinese. During the translating, he only relied on a dictionary and some friends who had a little knowledge of Chinese. Therefore his translation is a kind of “recreation”. In presenting the poetic meaning contained in “Wen Fu”, it’s understandable why there are often misinterpretations, or even a trend of deviation of the original text, which may be related to his poor understanding of Chinese. Hence, if the readers in the English world want to understand the theoretical quality contained in “Wen Fu” more accurately, the translation of Han is not the first choice in that misreading and misinterpretation often occurs (Wang Guangjian, 2010, p.43). However, Sam Hamill’s version of “Wen Fu” is the first English translation that is not translated by a sinologist. Although there are some misinterpretations, the emergence of its “lyric poetry style translation” not only attracts western readers to get interested in Lu Ji and his works in the English world again, but also creates an kind of version with a distinctive styles,

which provides references and is of significance and value for further studies of traditional Chinese literary theory. (Wang Guangjian, 2010, p.13)

Stephen Owen is an American sinologist and professor of Chinese literature in the Department of East Asian language and civilization, Harvard University. In 1992, he published *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* in Harvard University Press. As a textbook for the authoritative course of Harvard University, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* is one of the readings for graduate students of Arts in American universities to get familiar with Chinese literary theory. It is also the most authoritative anthology of translation about Chinese literary theory in the West so far (Wang Guangjian, 2010, p.13). The chapter four: *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, that is, the English translation of “Wen Fu”, is attached with a lot of detailed interpretations of the translator. In 1996, he published “An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911” in W. W. Norton, including the English translation of “Wen Fu”. The selected works of Norton press are generally classic collections of world culture, but most of them are western classics. Stephen Owen has made ancient Chinese literature reach the position of juxtaposition with western classics for the first time (Wang Guangjian, 2010, p.14).

As a comparative, Owen’s version is the most eye-catching version of “Wen Fu” from Chinese to English in the 1990s. It provides the Western readers with a detailed explanation on the ancient Chinese literary theory in the context of western thoughts and greatly promotes the dissemination and acceptance of “Wen Fu” as a classical literary theory among western people.

III. COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE TRANSLATIONS OF “WEN FU”

A. Translation of the Title

Grammatically, the title of traditional Chinese works usually takes the form of “Verb + object” (for example, “paper”), or “noun + noun”. The first noun describes the subject while the second noun describes the nature of the book, and “Wen Fu” is a good ace in point (Liu Ruoyu, 1987, p.216). “Wen”(文) is a noun, indicating a subject or an object, “Fu”(赋) is also a noun, indicating a genre. However, such kind of naming with a form of “noun + noun” is difficult to translate into English, so it is necessary to distinguish meanings word by word.

“Wen”(文) is not equivalent to “literature”, but should be interpreted into a kind of “written things” in a broad sense (Zhou Ruchang, 1950, p.67-68). “Fu”(赋) is a kind of ancient Chinese style, which has the characteristics of poetry and prose. Although “Fu”(赋) is often regarded as a poetic style, we’d better not regard “Fu”(赋) as a form of verse, but as a literary genre. Generally speaking, we can define it as follows: “describing a specific theme with verse or prose, usually a lengthy and carved description or explanation” (Liu Ruoyu, 1991, p.42).

Sam Hamill paraphrased “the art of writing”. First of all, the connotation of “Wen”(文) is interpreted accurately, and the naming of each chapter is based on the writing process. “Wring” is the main body of the article discussion, and how to write is the core of the discussion in the article. According to the title and content of each chapter, the translator highly summarizes the theme of the article, creatively determines the theme, and clarifies the main idea. Secondly, the meaning of “art” is “the use of the imagination to express ideas or feelings; an ability or a skill that you can develop with training and practice”. The way of “article + abstract noun + of + gerund” is adopted in the translation, which is basically in line with the form of “noun + noun”, but unfortunately, the writing style of “Fu”(赋) is not fully translated.

By contrast, Stephen Owen’s literal translation is “a position explanation on literature”. In the dictionary of *Literature and Subject Terms*, “exposition” is defined as “explaining a subject directly in the form of prose”, which is similar to the “Fu”(赋). The core word “exposition” refers to explaining or making clear by giving details, which conforms to the preference of “Fu”(赋)-making use of flowery words to build momentum, and the description of scenery objects pays attention to details. In addition, the word “exposition” also means the first part of a composition in sonata that introduces the themes. In music theory, it means the presentation part of fugue, which has the meaning of “making the initial statement for the theme” through the question and answer mode. This coincides with the early form of “Fu”(赋) which would set questions and offer answer at the beginning, such as the five odes of Xunzi’s “rite”, “wisdom”, “cloud”, “silkworm” and “liu”, and the four odes of Song Yu’s “wind”, “gao tang”, “goddess” and “deng tuzi lusts” (Cheng Huijuan, 2008). Xunqing’s and Song Yu’s “Fu” exactly adopt this way to unfold content and materials (Cao Minggang, 1998, p.11). As a form of music, exposition also implies the beauty of rhyme of “Fu”(赋). With “poetic” as the attribute, the essay points out that “Fu”(赋), like poetry, pays attention to the rhythm, so that readers can grasp the characteristics of “Fu”(赋) in the sight of the translated name. Although the translation also retains the form of “noun + noun”, it is not very appropriate to translate “Wen”(文) into “literal”, which does not accord with the interpretation of “Wen”(文) here and deviates from the theme of the article.

To sum up, in terms of the title translation, the two translators have their own advantages. In form, they all conform to the original naming method of “noun + noun”. As for content of the title, Sam Hamill’s grasp of “Wen”(文) is in line with the theme, while Stephen Owen’s explanation of “Fu”(赋) is correct and in place. Therefore, the author believes that the title may be translated into “A Poetic Exposition on Writing”, which not only highlights the theme but also clarifies the stylistic features of “Fu”(赋).

B. Translation of Terms

There are many ancient Chinese literary terms in “Wen Fu”, such as “物 (things)”. Here are two translators' translations of “物”:

e.g.1:恒患意不称物

the version H:We worry whether our ideas may fall short of their subjects

the version O:I constantly fear failure in my conception's 意 not being equal to the things of the world 物

e.g.2:瞻万物而思纷

the version H:Seeing the inner-connectedness of things

the version O:Peers on all the things of the world

e.g.3:物昭晰而互进

the version H:Only then may the inner voice grow clear as objects become numinous

the version O:Things 物 become luminous and draw one another forward

e.g.4:挫万物于笔端

the version H:all things emerge from within the writing brush

the version O:Crushes all things beneath the brush's tip

e.g.5:物无一量

the version H:and there is no one right way to measure

the version O:the things of the world have no single measure

e.g.6:赋体物而浏亮

the version H:Rhymed prose [“Fu”] presents its objects clearly

the version O: poetic exposition gives the normative forms of things and is clear and bright

e.g.7:其为物也多姿

the version H:Each new composition assumes a special air

the version O:As things, there are many postures

e.g.8:虽兹物之在我

the version H:The truth of the thing lies inside us

the version O:although this thing is in the self

The terms of Chinese literary theory are often not precisely defined. According to the WORD AND EXPRESSION, “物” refers to “everything in the world”, and the “物” in “Wen Fu” have always been interpreted as objects in *Selected Works of Chinese Dynasties*. The dictionary of Chinese poetics points out that “thing” can refer to both objective things and the image of things reflected in the brain by objective things (Chen Zhou, 2015, p.21). In addition, he added Chinese characters in example 1 and 3 to strengthen the concept of terms and strengthen the connection between terms and the word symbol by maintaining the consistency of terms. But this treatment does not effectively distinguish between the two meanings of “thing”.

The same term has different meanings in different periods. If only one translation is given to it, it will lead to deviation or even misunderstanding of readers (Chen Zhou, 2015:5). As for the ambiguous terms, Liu Ruoyu put forward: “a critical term...When there are several related and overlapping concepts, it is no longer natural to pursue consistent translation of the same term in all articles”(Liu Ruoyu, 2006, p.17). Hamill successively interpreted “物” as “subjects” (1 time), “thing” (2 times), “objects” (2 times), “the one” (1 time), “composition” (1 time) and “the thing” (1 time), which clearly expressed the connotation differences of “物”. However, the version H fails to meet the requirements of English translation of terms in literary theory and classical books, that is, the translation should be objective, complete and rigorous, in line with the requirements of the overall theoretical spirit and conceptual system of Chinese literary theory (Wang Xiaonong, 2014). The lack of consistency in translation undermines the systematic construction of terms.

To sum up, in translating terms, the translator should first trace back to the traditional comments and annotations, and make a reductive interpretation according to the context to avoid ambiguity. Secondly, the translator should also consider the position of terms, use western logical thinking for creative interpretation, and strive to maintain the coherence and purity of translation.

C. Translation Objectives and Strategies

The difference of translator's identity would exert an influence on the translation purpose and the translation strategy. Hamill is a poet. Poets often pay attention to the similar poetic functions of the original text and the representation of theoretical propositions, emphasize the poetic nature of the translated text with a small number of annotations, so they often adopt the translation strategy of domestication. Sam Hamill (Hamill, 2012, p.33) mentioned that translation is not to provide practical reference of word-to-word translation for peers, but focuses on the main paragraphs with the image of a lyric paraphrase to restore the main ideas and convey the poetry through quoting western poetry format, paraphrasing, addendum, abbreviation, provincial translation and structural adjustment.

However, borrowing the form of western lyric poetry will change the sentence pairs of the original text into a clause.

For example:

e.g.9: 游文章之林府，嘉丽藻之彬彬。

the version H: explore the treasures of the classics/where form and content are born.

In addition, there are 127 antithetical sentences in the text of “Wen Fu”, which are translated into 178 sections in English, and some Chinese antithetical sentences are translated into two sections (Wang Xiaonong, 2014, p.48). For example:

e.g.10: 至于操斧伐柯，虽取则不远，若夫随手之变，良难以辞逮。

the version H: When cutting an axe handle with an axe surely the model is at hand.

Each writer finds a new entrance into the mystery, and it is difficult to explain.

The version H is similar to English free verse without any annotation. For example 9, although the translator uses cross line reminders, they do not well reflect the features of “Fu”, which is a style of parallel, even and symmetrical, and rich in words and sentences (Wang Guangjian, 2010, p.43). In addition, ancient Chinese preferred words and sentences to be concise and implicit, which greatly reduced the interpretation space of English translation. For example, in example 10, the word “hacking” is taken from the *Book of Songs, Winds and Hake*. The metaphor can be taken from the nearest place. “随手之变(Change at will)” originates from the story of “round flat praying for round” in *Zhuangzi Tiandao*, which is a metaphor that experiences and methods can only be understood and cannot be expressed. The translator uses general language to translate, making the translation transparent and more comply with the expression habits of English, but it is a little general and superficial, and it is difficult to reflect the intertextuality of the original text, allusions and metaphors without annotation.

Stephen Owen is a sinologist. The purpose of sinologist’s translation is to introduce Chinese literary theory, present theoretical endoplasm, and express theoretical endoplasm with Chinese language structure and skills. Therefore, the translation strategy of foreignization is often preferred. When English cannot be fully conveyed, translation notes or explanations are often added. “This work is addressed primarily to two audiences: first, to scholar of western literature who wish to understand something of a tradition of western of non-western literary thought, and second, to students beginning the study of traditional Chinese literature” (Owen, 1992). The purpose of Stephen Owen’s translation is to introduce Chinese traditional critical literature to western sinologists. Owen adopts a translation paragraph by paragraph with comments and the author’s evaluation, paying attention to the structure, layout, antithesis and part of speech, and its translation notes are in sharp contrast with those in ancient China (Li, 2015, p.83). For example:

e.g.11: 詠世德之骏烈，诵先人之清芬。

the version O: He sings of the blazing splendor of moral power inherited by this age, chants of the pure fragrance (or “reputation”) of predecessors

“芬” is actually a metaphor about reputation. The translator takes the fully use of his imagination, identifies the specific meaning according to the context, then translates the word by free translation with an additional annotation. Such kind of translation is a foreignizing translation of a high degree. Besides, the translation omits western logic words, and makes use of the opaque translation to retain the sentence patterns of ancient Chinese. Although some collocations (such as “sing of” and “Spendor”, as well as “chant of” and “fragrance” in example 11) do not conform to the English convention, but the translator can better restore the “tail heavy” principle of Chinese expression(Chinese expressions usually put the center of a sentence at the end of a sentence), and tries to present the Chinese thinking logic mode by maintaining the language structure, so that the readers can better feel the rhetoric method and expression tension of Chinese Literary Theory, so as to realize the subtle differences between Chinese literary theory poetics and Western literary theory poetics.

IV. CONCLUSION

Since the middle of the 20th century, “Wen Fu” has been translated into the western world by many translators, which has greatly promoted the spread and acceptance of ancient Chinese literary theory in the west, and is of great significance for promoting the exchange and cooperation of ancient oriental literary theory in western academic circles. The paper finds that there are nine English versions of “Wen Fu” so far, among which Sam Hamill’s version and Stephen Owen’s version are selected for comparative study.

As a classic of literary theory, “Wen Fu” has profound thought and high literary value. Through a comparative study between Sam Hamill’s version and Stephen Owen’s version of “Wen Fu”, this paper aims to explore the translation purpose of the translator, analyze the differences in translation strategies, and explain the reasons for the differences in word selection so as to provide some supplements and new ideas of translation in terms of words and sentences for the existing studies of “Wen Fu”.

In Sam Hamill’s translation, the translator adopts the domestication translation, quotes the western poetry style, and conforms to the expression of the target language. In the Stephen Owen’s translation, the Chinese literary theory is well introduced. Moreover, the foreignization is dominated in his translation. Moreover, the meanings of some words are distinguished in a more accurate way while the terminology is processed in a more systematic way, which is conducive to reflect the intertextuality of the original text. The reasons for these differences are mainly related to the translator’s identity and the translator’s translation purpose.

All in all, the two versions are successful practices of translation, both of which provide valuable experience and references for the re-translation and studies in the near future for translation researchers and sinology scholars.

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