

Comparative Analysis of the English Translation of Xunzi from the Perspective of the Translator's Subjectivity

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Abstract

The translator's subjectivity is an important factor that affects the style of the translation. The different choice of translators will affect the translation of the original text, which will present completely different translation versions. From the perspective of the translator's subjectivity, this paper makes a comparative analysis of the English translation of Xunzi by Homer Hasenpflug Dubs and John Knoblock, and analyzes the differences of words and translation strategies chosen by the translator in the translation of specific cultural words, hoping to provide some insights for the English translation of Chinese classics.

Keywords

Translator's subjectivity; English translation of Chinese classics; Xunzi.

1. Introduction

1.1. An Introduction to the English Translation of Xunzi

Xunzi is a seminal work of Chinese philosophy attributed to the renowned philosopher Xun Kuang, also known as Xunzi. Belonging to the Confucian school of thought, this text is considered one of the "Four Books" of Confucianism and holds significant importance in the realm of classical Chinese philosophy. The English translation of Xunzi offers readers a profound insight into the philosophical teachings of Xunzi, covering a wide array of topics ranging from ethics and politics to education and human nature. Through this translation, readers are presented with a comprehensive exploration of Xunzi's ideas and beliefs, which have had a lasting impact on Chinese intellectual history. Central to Xunzi is the concept of human nature, with Xunzi positing that human beings are inherently selfish and driven by desires. He argues that through self-cultivation and education, individuals can overcome their innate tendencies and cultivate virtues such as righteousness, integrity, and propriety. Xunzi emphasizes the importance of ritual and social norms in fostering moral behavior and maintaining social order. The English translation of this text captures the eloquence and depth of Xunzi's prose, allowing readers to engage with his philosophical insights in a meaningful way. It presents a nuanced examination of ethics, governance, and the nature of society, shedding light on the complexities of human behavior and the challenges of moral cultivation. However, compared with the Analects of Confucius and Mencius, the number of English translations of Xunzi is relatively small. In 1893, James Li, a British Sinologist, translated Xunzi's "Sexual Evil", which is the earliest English translation of Xunzi in the English world. In 1928, De Xiaoqian published Selected Translations of Xunzi, which selected some articles from Xunzi for translation. In 1963, Burton Watson published Xunzi. Known for his expertise in translating classical Chinese literature, Watson's rendition of Xunzi's work has been celebrated for its

clarity and accessibility. John Knoblock's translation of Xunzi was completed in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Knoblock's scholarly approach and attention to detail have made his translation a valuable resource for students and scholars of Chinese philosophy. Eric L. Hutton's contributions to the English translation of Xunzi were made in the early 2010s. Hutton's translation is known for its insightful commentary and analysis, providing readers with a deeper understanding of Xunzi's philosophical ideas. Philip J. Ivanhoe's work on translating Xunzi dates back to the mid-2000s. Ivanhoe, a leading scholar of Chinese philosophy, is recognized for his scholarly rigor and attention to historical context in his translations. Donald Munro's translation of Xunzi was completed in the 1980s. Munro's translation is valued for its clarity and accessibility, making Xunzi's philosophical concepts more understandable to English-speaking readers.

These scholars and translators have made significant contributions to the field of Chinese philosophy through their English translations of Xunzi. Their efforts have helped to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western philosophical traditions, allowing readers to engage with the profound insights of Xunzi's work across different and linguistic contexts. By delving into the English translation of Xunzi, readers can gain a deeper understanding of classical Chinese philosophy and its relevance to contemporary discourse. The translation serves as a valuable resource for scholars, students, and anyone interested in exploring the rich tapestry of Chinese philosophical thought. Overall, the English translation of Xunzi stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of Xunzi's teachings and their continued influence on philosophical inquiry. It offers a gateway into the world of ancient Chinese thought, inviting readers to ponder questions of ethics, governance, and human nature through the lens of of China's most esteemed philosophers.

1.2. An Introduction to Translators' Subjectivity

Translation is a complex and multifaceted process that involves not only linguistic transfer but also the interpretation and representation of meaning across languages and cultures. One of the key factors that influence the outcome of a translation is the translator's subjectivity, which encompasses their personal background, beliefs, experiences, and cultural biases. Traditional translation studies have largely ignored the subjectivity of translators, because they regard translation as a subordinate act of literary creation, which requires translators to be loyal to the original text and the original author. With the introduction of the theory of "cultural turn", attention to the translator's status has been greatly enhanced. Translation is an ever-changing process from understanding to expression, of which the translator is the core. (Gong Jun, 2010: 129).

Translator subjectivity refers to the unique perspective, beliefs, and experiences that a translator brings to the act of translation. It encompasses a wide range of factors, including the translator's cultural background, linguistic proficiency, personal biases, and interpretative decisions. The main characteristics of the translator's subjectivity are initiative, activeness and self - activeness. Activeness means that translators should respect the original text when translating, and cannot translate at will [3]. Initiative means to exert subjective initiative on the basis of respecting the original text. Self-activeness refers to the direction and purpose of the subjective initiative.[1] The translator has dual attributes. The subjective initiative and creativity in translation activities are determined by the translator's subjectivity, which also shapes the passive characteristics of the translator in the translation process. Translator subjectivity is inherent in the translation process and plays a crucial role in shaping the final product, as translators must make a series of subjective choices when rendering a text from one language to another. The Influence of Translator Subjectivity on Translation Translator subjectivity can manifest in various ways and have a significant impact on the translation process and outcome. One of the primary ways in which translator subjectivity influences

translation is through the selection of words, phrases, and expressions that best convey the meaning of the source text. Translators must draw on their linguistic knowledge and cultural understanding to make informed decisions about how to render a text in a way that is faithful to the original while also making it accessible to the target audience. Additionally, translator subjectivity can influence the interpretation of ambiguous or culturally specific elements in the source text. Translators may rely on their own experiences and beliefs to interpret and translate such elements, leading to variations in the final translation depending on the individual translator's perspective. For example, a translator who is familiar with a particular cultural practice may choose to retain a culturally specific term in the translation, while another translator may opt for a more general equivalent that is easier for the target audience to understand.

Furthermore, translator subjectivity can also shape the stylistic choices and tone of a translation. Translators may choose to adapt the style and tone of the source text to better resonate with the target audience, drawing on their own writing style and preferences to create a translation that is engaging and effective. This subjective element of translation can result in variations in style, tone, and register across different translations of the same source text. While translator subjectivity can enhance the richness and nuance of a translation, it also poses several challenges and implications for the practice of translation. One of the main challenges is the potential for bias and distortion in the translation process, as translators may unconsciously inject their own beliefs and perspectives into the text, leading to misinterpretations or inaccuracies. It is essential for translators to be aware of their own subjectivity and strive for objectivity and fidelity to the source text in their translations. Moreover, it also raises questions about the ethics and responsibility of translators in representing the voices and perspectives of the original authors. Translators must navigate the delicate balance between staying true to the source text and making it accessible and engaging for the target audience, taking into account their own subjectivity and the cultural context in which the translation will be read. Thus, translator subjectivity is a fundamental aspect of the translation process that influences the choices, interpretations, and representations made by translators when rendering a text from one language to another. While translator subjectivity can enrich and enhance a translation, it also poses challenges and implications that translators must navigate with care and awareness. By critically examining the role of translator subjectivity in translation, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances involved in the practice of translation and strive for more accurate, faithful, and culturally sensitive. Based on the comparison of the English versions of Xunzi· Human Nature Is Evil (Excerpts) by Homer Hasenpflug Dubs and John Knoblock (They are called Dubs and Knoblock respectively in the following text), this paper analyzes the translator's subjectivity from the perspective of the translator's translation of words and phrases in the text.

2. The Translator's Subjectivity Presented in the Two English Versions of Xunzi · Human Nature is Evil(Excerpts)

2.1. Different Understandings of the Original Text

Translation must first meet the original text, and every translator must understand the work thoroughly when preparing to translate a work. However, under the influence of different historical and cultural backgrounds, education level and social status, different translators will inevitably have different understandings of the original text. Therefore, the subjectivity of the translator is revealed in the translation. In the translation of Xunzi·Sex Evil (Excerpts), the two translators have different understandings of the original text.

2.1.1. Using Different Words

Example (1)

Original text: rén zhī xìng è, qí shàn zhě wěi yě.

Translation version of Dubs: The nature of man is evil- his goodness is only acquired **by training**.

Translation version of Knoblock: Human nature is evil; any goodness in humans is acquired by conscious exertion.

For the character “wei”, it's explained as the following in Shuowen Jiezi: “acquire knowledge through people’s efforts”. Thus, “wei” here means something done through subjective effort. Dubs translated it as “acquired by training”, and Knoblock translated it as “acquired by conscious exertion”. In contrast, Dubs’s translation only shows the meaning of learning contained in the character “wei”, and does not express the meaning of acquiring something through effort. While Knoblock translated the “effort” contained in the character “wei” well. The two translators have different understandings of the original text, so their translations are bound to be different, and the subjectivity of the two translators is well reflected here.

Example (2)

The original text: shēng ér yǒu ěr mù zhī yù, yǒu hǎo shēng sè yān,

Translation version of Dubs: Man originally possessed the desires of the ear and the eye; **he likes praise and is lustful**.

Translation version of Knoblock: Man is born possessing the desires of the ears and eyes **(which are fond of sounds and colors)**.

In this sentence, the two translators adopted different translation methods when translating the phrase “sheng se”. “sheng se” refers to the love of singing, dancing and women. Dubs translated it as “he likes praise and is lustful”, in which lustful refers to the desire for luxury life and beauty, aptly reflecting the meaning of “sheng se” in the original text. However, Knoblock's translation of “sheng se” stays on the surface, only translating it into “fond of sounds and colors”. It can be seen that Knoblock did not understand the implied meaning of “sheng se”, so only translated it according to its literal meaning.

Example (3)

The original text: ér guī yú bào,

Translation version of Dubs: there is **reversion to a state of violence**.

Translation version of Knoblock: **resulting in a cruel tyranny**.

This statement is the result of indulging in the phenomena described above, and therefore it is a summary and generality of the former sentences. For the translation of “gui” and “bao”, the two translators took different methods. Following the text, Knoblock translated “gui” as “resulting” and “bao” as “cruel tyranny”, meaning that indulging the phenomena described above will eventually lead to a state of anarchy. While Dubs translated “gui” as “reversion” and “bao” as “a state of violence”, meaning that the state would regress to the original riot, which is consistent with Xunzi's view of history. Xunzi believed that in ancient times, human relations were chaotic, only sages can lead to a society with rules and well governance.

2.1.2. Difference in Sentence Pattern

Example (4)

The original text: jīn rén zhī xìng, shēng ér yǒu hǎo lì yān, shùn shì, gù zhēng duó shēng ér cí ràng wáng yān; shēng ér yǒu jí è yān, shùn shì, gù cán zéi shēng ér zhōng xìn wáng yān; shēng ér yǒu ěr mù zhī yù, yǒu hǎo shēng sè yān, shùn shì, gù yín luàn shēng ér lǐ yì wén lǐ wáng yān.

Translation version of Dubs: The original nature of man today is to seek for gain. **If this desire is followed.....** If these tendencies are followed..... If these are followed.....

Translation version of Knoblock: Now, the nature of man is such that he is born with a love of profit. Following this nature will cause..... Indulging these feelings causes..... Indulging these desires causes.....

In the choice of sentence patterns, both translators use different methods to keep consistent with the original sentence patterns, but the two translators have different treatment of parallel sentences. Dubs translated "shun shi" as adverbial clause of if condition. "shi" refers to the content mentioned in the first half of the sentence, so Dubs translated them as "desires", "tendencies" and "these" respectively according to the meaning of the sentence. Knoblock translated "shun shi" into the gerund structure, "Following this nature", "Indulging these feelings" and "Indulging these desires", and for the translation of "shi", Knoblock translated it into "nature", "feelings" and "desires", which fully reflects the diversity of English words and the creativity of the translator as the subject of translation.

Example(5)

The original text: zú kě yǐ piān xíng tiān xià, rán ér wèi cháng yǒu néng piān xíng tiān xià zhě yě.

Translation version of Knoblock: It is possible for a man to travel by foot across the width of the whole world, yet there has never been a case where any one was able to travel across the world by foot.

Translation version of Dubs: It is perfectly possible that he could govern the whole country, yet he may never have the ability to govern the whole country.

From the above two translations, it can be seen that Dubs clearly understood "sufficient" as the meaning of sufficient, so he used "perfectly" to express this "sufficient", which is obviously a mistake in understanding here. While Knoblock correctly understood the meaning and corresponded to the original text in more words and sentence patterns. It also shows that translators have different understandings of the same text. Due to the different cultural background and times of each translator, translators naturally have different considerations, some of which are to facilitate the understanding of the target language readers, while others are to maintain the style and content of the original text. Therefore, the translated content is quite different even they choose the same translation text .

Example(6)

The original text: suī yǒu shèng wáng lǐ yì, jiāng hé jiā yú zhèng lǐ píng zhì yě zāi ?

Translation version of Knoblock: And even supposing that there were sage kings and ritual and moral principles, what indeed could they add to correctness, natural principles, peace, and order!

Translation version of Dubs: Although these were Sage-Kings, the rules(Yi), what could they add to of proper conduct (Li) and justice true principles and just government?

Here, the "Zheng Li Ping Zhi" is the focus of understanding, whether it is two nouns with a attributive structure, or four separate single-word nouns? The translation of sentence patterns is also a key point. From the perspective of both versions, they each have their own approach. First of all, Knoblock understands "Zheng Li Ping Zhi" as four separate words "correctness, natural principles, peace, and order", using a rhetorical question. This translation, starting from the meaning of each word, is also more conducive to the understanding of the target language readers. While Dubs uses the biased structure of true principles and just government to understand the meaning of "justice and justice", which is obviously different from the original text, but the sentence pattern is consistent with the original text. Although the sentence pattern is consistent, it may cause misunderstanding for ordinary readers of the target language.

2.1.3. Different Emphasis

Different translators have different understandings of the same text due to their different aesthetic and cultural backgrounds, as well as the classes they live in, so the emphasis of translation is also various.

Example (7)

The original text: gù zhēng duó shēng ér cí ràng wáng yān;

Translation version of Dubs: strife and rapacity result and courtesy dies.

Translation version of Knoblock: aggressiveness and greedy tendencies to grow and courtesy and deference to disappear.

“Zhengduo” means “strife” and both translation have the same meaning here. However, in the Dubs version, the “strife” is more emphasized on the aggressiveness. While, in the Knoblock’s version, “greedy and deference” further highlighted the religious meaning of the translation.

Example (8)

The original text: gù yín luàn shēng ér lǐ yì wén lǐ wáng yān.

Translation version of Dubs: impurity and disorder result, and the rules of proper conduct, justice and refined culture are done away with.

Translation version of Knoblock: dissolute and wanton behavior to result and ritual and moral principles, precepts of good form, and the natural order of good reason to perish.

“Li yi wen li” generally refers to norms, order and civilization. The set of rites that conform to the hierarchies of slave and feudal societies is called “li”, and acts that conform to these systems are called “yi”. There are three aspects of rites according to the understanding of Confucian. First, “li fa”, which had a wide range of normative functions in Chinese feudal society; Second, “li su”, which refer to customs and laws, are spontaneously generated in social order and contained in traditional customs, and are people’s consensus. Finally, “li yi”, which refers to the set of visible rituals that embody, express, and reinforce rites. Dubs translated it into “rules of proper conduct”, not strictly following the original form, while Knoblock translated it as “ritual” according to the original form. Both translators pursued to accurately convey the meaning of “li”. However, they both translated only one meaning of “li”, that is, what is right to do, the meaning of “doing the right thing” is not translated. “yi” is the essence of Confucianism. Confucianism internalizes the philosophical concept of “yi” into individual conducts and applies it to daily life and people’s behavior. There are three meanings of “yi”: The first is just, proper morality, and behavior or reason; The second is justice; The third is moral, appropriate, just and reasonable. According to its meaning, both “li” and “yi” have the meaning of “what is right to do”. With regard to the translation of “yi”, Dubs translated it into “rules of proper conduct” which combined the meaning of “li” and “yi”, taking them as a code and norm to restrict behavior. While Knoblock translated “yi” into “moral principles” which conforms to the traditional Western vocabulary and is easier for the target reader to understand. “wen li” refers to the hierarchical etiquette system, in the text, it means order and civilization. Dubs translated it as “justice and refined culture” adding the western concept of “justice” to facilitate the understanding of the target language readers. Knoblock translated it as “precepts of good form, and the natural order of good reason”, which explained the connotation of “wen li” well.

2.2. Different Translation Strategies and Methods

Influenced by the translator’s subjectivity, different translators often adopt different translation strategies for the same text to achieve the desired effect.

2.2.1. Domestication and Foreignization

Domestication refers to the transformation of the cultural elements of the source language into those of the target language in the translation process, so that the translation is more in line with the cultural background and language habits of the target reader. Domestication emphasizes making the translation easier to be understood and accepted by the target readers, eliminating the gap between the source language culture and the target language culture as much as possible, and making the translation result more close to the cultural environment of the target language. Foreignization, on the other hand, means that the cultural elements of the source language are retained in the translation process, and the cultural elements of the target

language are not deliberately transformed, so as to maintain the uniqueness and heterogeneity of the original text. Foreignization emphasizes the preservation of the exotic flavor and unique charm of the original text, so that the target readers can feel the cultural characteristics and background contained in the original text, even though it may cause a certain degree of language gap. In this text, the two translators adopt domestication and foreignization respectively in order to achieve the ideal translation.

Example (9)

The original text: gù bì jiāng yǒu shī fǎ zhī huà;

Translation version of Dubs: Hence the civilizing influence of **teachers and laws**;

Translation version of Knoblock: Thus, it is necessary that man's nature undergo the transforming influence of a **teacher and the model**;

Xunzi believes that human beings are born with the desire for external things, which is human nature, if we indulge this nature, it will lead to disputes between people and society will fall into chaos. Therefore, it is necessary to establish the recognition and observance of morality, etiquette and related systems through teaching and obeying rules while properly preserving people's desires through acquired education. The most basic way of "jiao hua" is to guide people's desires, words and deeds through the teaching of teachers and the restriction of the etiquette system. In ancient China, both "fa" and "li" were used to regulated people's behaviors; "li" was to promote kindness; "fa" was to punish bad behaviors. The ancients believed that although the "fa" was formulated and promulgated by the king, the king and the people in the world had to abide by it, which reflected the justice and fairness of the law. Dubs translated "shi fa" as "teachers and laws" and adopted the foreignization strategy. "Laws" not only refers to the prescribed legal system, but also refers to the natural laws that all things abide by. Here, laws refers to the man-made system, which not only shows the meaning of the original text, but also facilitates the understanding of the target language readers. Knoblock translated it as "teacher and the model", adopting the domestication strategy, which tries to express the original content as much as possible and conform to Chinese culture. "Model" is the result of education, and a model is educated by teachers and regulated by laws. The foreignization translation of Dubs also shows through the Western concept of "justice" which is added to facilitate the acceptance and understanding of the target language readers.

2.2.2. Literal Translation and Free Translation

Literal translation and free translation are two common translation methods in the field of translation. Literal Translation refers to the translation of the text of the source language into the target language word for word, keeping the structure, grammar and word order of the original text, and keeping the literal meaning and expression of the original text as much as possible. This translation method focuses on the accurate restoration of the original text to ensure that the original information and expression of the original text are conveyed. Free Translation, on the other hand, is flexibly reexpressed in the target language according to the meaning and emotion of the original text, so as to ensure that the translation is more closely related to the idioms and expressions of the target language. Free translation emphasizes on conveying the meaning of the original text while taking into account the cultural background and language habits of the target audience, so as to make the translation easier to understand and accept.

Example (10)

The original text: shēng ér yǒu ěr mù zhī yù, yǒu hǎo shēng sè yān ,

Translation version of Dubs: Man originally possessed the desire of the ear and the eye; he likes praise and is lustful.

Translation version of Knoblock: Man is born possessing the desire of the ears and eyes(which are fond of sounds and colors).

In the translation, the two translators often adopt different translation methods for some specific words. As to the translation of "sheng se", Dubs adopted the method of free translation and translated it as "he likes praise and is lustful" according to the connotation of the word. While Knoblock adopt literal translation method and translated it into "fond of sounds and colors". In contrast, the translation of Dubs is closer to the original text, and Knoblock's translation is easier for English readers to understand. The two translators adopt different methods to translate, which fully reflects the initiative of the translators' subjectivity.

2.3. Selected Different Original Texts

Homer Dubs, an American scholar, started the translation and research of Xunzi in the American Sinology circle, and made a more comprehensive translation and introduction of Xunzi, and published *Hsüntze: the Moulder of Ancient Confucianism* in 1927. In 1928, he published *The Works of Hsuntze*, which was based on Wang Xianqian's Xunzi Collection Interpretation, and translated 19 pieces, such as Xunzi: Exhortation to Learning, Xunzi: Zhong Ni, Xunzi: Fei shier zi. A short introduction is made to the text under each article in the catalogue, and then a "preface" is placed before the translation to introduce the history of China before Xunzi. Thus he became the first person to study Xunzi and write a book in the American Sinology circle, which had a profound influence on the study of Xunzi in the western Sinology circle.

For John Knoblock, he introduced the comprehensive translation of Xunzi in the study of Confucianism in the United States, and published the book *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*. He is committed to the translation of Xunzi from an excerpt to a comprehensive translation and introduction, which provides text support for scholars in the English world to further understand and study Xunzi comprehensively.

3. Conclusion

From this, it can be seen that under a series of objective conditions, different translators have different understandings of the original text, and thus they definitely choose different translation strategies and methods to form different styles of translation, which fully demonstrates their respective aesthetic tendencies and expression habits. Although both translators strive to keep the core of the original, their translation techniques differ significantly. It all stems from their differing interpretations of the original text. Each translator and his works should be studied from a variety of historical perspectives. The translator will incorporate his own understanding into the original piece. The translator will have a connection with the author while translating. The translator's job is not only to express the content of the original text, but also to consider the meaning of the translation for modern readers as the original text evolves with The Times. If each translator strives to be faithful to the original text while losing his own views, the translation that readers can read will be quite boring. To accurately depict a work, the translator's subjectivity should be welcomed. Therefore, in the study of translation, the subjectivity of the translator should not be ignored, which is a very key factor affecting the quality of translation. Taking Xunzi as example, this article unveils the broadness and profoundness of Chinese culture, and also there is a long way to study the English translation of Chinese classics. It is hoped that this paper can provide some ideas for the subsequent study of English translation of Chinese cultural classics.

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