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## Analysis of Lin Yutang's english version of *Six chapters of a floating life* from the perspective of hermeneutic translation theory

Shuting Hong

Foreign Languages and Cultures, Nanjing Normal University, Jiangsu, China

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### Abstract

Literature has long been the source of frequently-opted translation material, so studies on literary translation have gained popularity among scholars who are committed to better applying theory to literary translation practice. Generally speaking, it is easier to figure out new approaches to literary translation by studying the translated texts of a high-status translator as a case from the perspective of a certain theory than purely analyzing the theory and putting it into practice. This paper, taking hermeneutic translation theory as a theoretical frame, aims to find out how this theory is reflected in Lin Yutang's English version of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* and what implications for literary translation practice can be drawn from it by the method of textual analysis. Since the combination of the translation of literature written in classical Chinese, a special form of literary translation, with hermeneutic translation theory may offer a fresh and innovative insight into literary translation studies, thorough analysis is of great value. A detailed analysis shows that George Steiner's four-fold motion, namely trust, aggression, import and compensation, is fully reflected in Lin Yutang's translation of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, and this discovery may shed light on the future literary translation practice and research

**Keywords:** hermeneutic translation theory, six chapters of a floating life, Lin Yutang

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### Introduction

Over the past decades, the pace of globalization and inter-cultural communication between countries has accelerated, and culture awareness has pushed scholars to devote themselves to the translation of Chinese literature, so as to show distinctive Chinese culture to the world. Hermeneutics has an intrinsic relationship with translation, for it is a branch of philosophy, which has much to do with understanding and interpreting. Therefore, integration of hermeneutics and translation has given rise to hermeneutic translation theories, among which George Steiner's four-fold hermeneutic motion is foremost.

Having enjoyed a reputation as an excellent Chinese literature until now, *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* written in classical Chinese by Shen Fu in the Qing Dynasty and translated by Lin Yutang who has a perfect mastery of both Chinese and English has been analyzed by many researchers from different angles. Yet few studies related to the analysis of the hermeneutic four-fold motion in it under the guidance of hermeneutic translation theory. On the basis of existing literary translation studies, a case study of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* is carried out from the perspective of hermeneutic translation theory in an effort to find out how this theory yields effect on the translation of literature written in classical Chinese.

Meanwhile, *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, a special genre of Chinese literature, is filled with flexible structures, concise expressions and lots of culture-loaded words or phrases. Integrating the English version of it with hermeneutic translation theory is both a challenging and an original attempt.

### George Steiner's Hermeneutic Translation Theory

In *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, Steiner initially focuses "on the psychological and intellectual functioning of the mind of the translator", and then moves to the discussion of "the process of meaning and understanding underlying the translation process" (Munday 2012: 244) <sup>[1]</sup>. He proposes the viewpoint of "understanding as translation" and defines hermeneutic approach as "the investigation of what it means to 'understand' a piece of oral or written speech, and the attempt to diagnose this process in terms of a general model of meaning" (Steiner 2001: 249). When it comes to the theory part, his own hermeneutically oriented model is brought forth. He describes the hermeneutics of translation as "the act of elicitation and appropriative transfer of meaning" (Steiner 2001: 312), deeming translation as "an exact art" (Steiner 2001: 311).

The Hermeneutic Motion" is the core chapter of the whole book, in which Steiner states that the hermeneutic motion is four-fold, namely trust, aggression, import and compensation. Main points of each are as follows:

Trust, "an investment of belief", is underlined by Steiner as "initiative", saying "all understanding, and the demonstrative statement of understanding which is translation, starts with an act of trust" (Steiner 2001: 312). In the case of translation, trust means a translator always believes there is a text that is worth his understanding and

interpretation or a “translator shows ‘generosity’ to an alien text” (Amiri, Araghi, Farjami 2014). Therefore, the “initiative trust” requires translators to consider whether the source text stands “for something in the world, a coherent ‘something’ that can be translated even if the meaning might not be apparent immediately” (Munday 2012: 245) <sup>[1]</sup>.

Aggression, which comes after trust, “is incursive and extractive” (Steiner 2001: 314). In the case of translation, “the translator enters the text, extracts meaning and takes it away” (Amiri, Araghi, Farjami 2014). Steiner (2001: 314) metaphorically depicts that the source text aggressed just resembles “an open-mine left an empty scar in the landscape.” Literally, during the process of translation, the translator is affected by conflicts between languages, ideologies, cultures and many other factors. Such conflicts will necessarily lead to the aggression of the original intention of the author. So, this move involves translators in a text from a foreign point of view and culture background.

The third move, import, is incorporative. It refers to “how the ST meaning, extracted by the translator in the second is brought into the TL which is already full of its own words and meanings” (Munday 2012: 246). However, “no language, no traditional symbolic set or cultural ensemble imports without risk of being transformed” (Steiner 2001: 315). In the stage of import, “the translated text assimilates the elements from the original text” (Zhao, Chen, Li 2019) <sup>[4]</sup>. As a result, the act of importation “can potentially dislocate and relocate the whole native structure” (Steiner 2001: 315).

The last move compensation, or “the enactment of reciprocity”, is “the crux of the métier and morals of translation” (Steiner 2001: 316). After first three moves, “there is the unbalance” caused by “an outflow of energy from the source and an inflow into the receptor altering both and altering the harmonics of the whole system” (Steiner 2001: 317-318). The translator may feel obliged to restore the “parity” since he is translating instead of creating (Yan 2017). When a translator “endeavors to restore the balance of forces, of integral presence, which his appropriate comprehension has disrupted” (Steiner 2001: 318), the fidelity or faithfulness can be achieved. In this regard, “the arrows of meaning, of cultural, of psychological benefaction, moves both ways” (Steiner 2001: 318).

### **Analysis of Six Chapters of a Floating Life**

After the elaboration on the theory comes the case study of Six Chapters of a Floating Life that involves both the Chinese version by Shen and the English version by Lin. It first deals with the characteristics of the translation of classical Chinese and then expounds how this literary prose written in classical Chinese is rendered into English from the perspective of hermeneutic translation theory.

### **Characteristics of the Translation of Literature Written in Classical Chinese**

The characteristics of classical Chinese translation can be summarized based on the comparison between the original text and the English version. The first and most obvious characteristic is that the rendering of classical Chinese translation into English is not direct. As classical Chinese was used in all types of writings before the New Culture Movement, it is sometimes hard for the modern society to comprehend. So, when rendering classical Chinese into English, it must be first transferred, in an invisible way, into its vernacular form that is comprehensible to average readers. In this case, the translator is considered as a middleman between the ancient writer and modern readers. That is why we often feel at sea with the original text, but suddenly see the light when reading the English version.

The second characteristic is that the target text is always longer than the source text. Just as mentioned above, the process of translating classical Chinese involves the transfer of classical Chinese into its vernacular form, and the translator needs more words to explain or express the original in the final English version to ensure faithfulness and smoothness. Also, many deep meanings are hidden from the concise classical Chinese, so more explanatory words are necessary to bring the hidden to the surface.

Irreversible would be the third characteristic of classical Chinese translation. That is to say, when the translator is given the text written in classical Chinese, it is comparatively easier for him to translate into English if he can perfectly comprehend the meaning of classical Chinese. However, if he is given the English version of the text, it is rather difficult or even impossible for him to produce the same original text that is written in classical Chinese. Generally, when a translator is translating literature written in classical Chinese, a mixed sense of restraint and freedom will arise spontaneously, because the first characteristic dictates the translator’s involvement and faithfulness, but the last two endow the translator with translation freedom.

### **Analysis of Four-Fold Motion**

As is shown in chapter two, four-fold motion is the most important and primary in Steiner’s hermeneutic translation theory. How it is reflected in Lin’s translation is the focus of this paper and it also deserves exploration and illustration. The results will be presented respectively with specific examples.

### **Trust**

A translator who views the original text as worthy of translation must have invested his trust in it before he made a decision to translate it. Lin Yutang is not an exception. His trust can be attributed to three factors, namely his personal interest in the source text, something he has in common with Shen Fu, and his linguistic and cultural competence.

What arouses Lin's interest is Shen's concise but vivid depiction of all aspects of his life accompanied by his wife, Yün, who is a housewife but is thirsty for knowledge and passionate with life. Lin speaks highly of her in the preface he writes for the book, describing her as "one of the loveliest women in Chinese literature". There is no doubt that Lin is totally absorbed in the whole book that starts with the marital relations between the couple. And he is deeply touched by the pure love and the simple but interesting life which he has a strong yearning for. It is his personal interest that has impelled him to present, through translation, the love stories and the romantic and positive lifestyles in ancient China to the readers, particularly foreign readers.

In addition, it is not hard to perceive that Lin has much in common with Shen. In the first place, Lin's life experience is quite similar to Shen's and they have a similar value system, attitude towards life and aesthetic taste. All these similarities can justify his choice to translate this book. Moreover, the misery, the hardship, and the harsh reality implied between the lines echoes what Lin was confronted with in real life. Such emotional resonance enables Lin to comprehensively understand the original text, and then accurately express the original meaning.

Lastly, Lin has long been dedicated to cultural communication between China and western countries. His perfect command of Chinese and English also determines his responsibility to spread Chinese culture to the outside through translation. As *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* is written in classical Chinese, filled with culture-loaded words, literary quotations, Chinese ideology and philosophy, translating it is an optimal way to demonstrate the charm of Chinese literature and, at the same time, move foreign readers towards Chinese culture.

### **Aggression**

Aggression occurs when the translator is affected by different languages, cultures, ideologies and so on. These factors are the roots of different thinking modes. Therefore, when the translator transfers a given text from one language to another language, he has to have pre-understanding or perceptions of the target culture background, the target language pattern and the target thinking modes. In this case, the source is invaded the moment it is transferred to the target. Lin has done a good job in invading the original text and extracting the meaning, for he puts himself in target readers' position, taking various differences between Chinese and English into account.

Firstly, English thinking modes lay particular emphasis on rationality, reason and objectivity, by which they know about the world and solve problems. While Chinese thinking modes, influenced by Chinese traditional philosophy, stress perception, intuition and sensibility. That's why English is hypotactic and its sentences strictly follow grammatical rules, but Chinese is paratactic and many parts of the sentence are often omitted. Examples in *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* go as follows.

- a. Of a slender figure, she had drooping shoulders and a rather long neck, slim but not to the point of being skinny. Her eyebrows were arches and in her eyes there was a look of quick intelligence and soft refinement. The only defect was that two front teeth were slightly inclined forward, which was not a mark of good omen. (Lin 1999: 7)

In this sentence, the Chinese version, only one sentence, is very concise. While in the English version, Lin uses three sentences to express the same meaning, with each sentence having a different subject. Besides, many conjunctions ("and", "but") and relative pronouns ("which", "that") which are rarely seen in Chinese are used to show the internal logic and grammatical relations.

- b. And so we began to drink by the side of the window, but before we had tasted three cups, we heard suddenly the noise of a splash under the bridge, as if some one had fallen into the water. (Lin 1999: 33)

In the Chinese text, the subject is omitted, but when we Chinese read this sentence, we can easily detect by perception that these actions are performed by Shen Fu and his wife. However, in the English text, Lin adds the subject "we" before each verb, as the subject is an essential component for an English sentence to be logical and readable, despite redundancy. Secondly, Chinese culture has shaped Chinese language to be human-centered in accordance with Taoism, while in western countries where people attach importance to research and science, objects naturally become the major focus. It is this disparity that determines that Chinese embodies subject consciousness but English object consciousness. Specifically, there is more active voice in Chinese but more passive voice in English. There are more animate subjects in Chinese, but more inanimate subjects in English. Typical examples are listed below.

- c. That day, we were kept busy entertaining guests and towards evening, music was played. (Lin 1999: 13)

In the Chinese text, the whole sentence is written in active voice which is typical of Chinese. In the English version, the whole sentence is presented in passive voice by Lin, which is more common in English. Back to the Chinese text, "亲朋" is the original subject of the first part, but in the second part, the subject is nowhere to be found. In this situation, Lin chooses to transfer it to passive voice in which the subject is not that important, just as other translators will do.

- d. Yün looked back at me with a smile and our souls were carried away in a mist of passion. (Lin 1999: 13)

In this sentence, active voice in the second part of the Chinese text is transferred to passive voice, but Lin managed to preserve the romantic ambience that is perceived in the Chinese text, due to his deliberate choice of

words. In this way, the passive voice in the translation improves the naturalness and smoothness of the target text without any loss of aesthetic quality.

- e. She stood up before long and came back to us with the bag, perspiring all over. “My strength will fail me if I am going to pick any more,” she said. (Lin 1999: 39)

Though the subject is omitted in the Chinese text, it is not a problem for readers to figure out it according to the context. The last part of the Chinese text is a sentence said by “she” (Yün), so the doer is Yün, an animate subject. But Lin selects “my strength”, an inanimate subject, as the doer, which is a solid evidence of his conformity to idiomatic English expressions.

Thirdly, Chinese is a dynamic language in which verbs are used more frequently, but English is a static language in which nouns are more preferred and nominalization is quite common. Such difference is also a point of aggression, reflected in Lin’s translation.

- f. As Suyün was a great drinker, she filled a cup full and drank it up at a draught. (Lin 1999: 67)

In the Chinese text, the first half line means Suyün loves drinking. However, Lin doesn’t translate it in this way. Considering that English is a static language, he adopts the technique of nominalization so as to make the target text sound more native.

- g. Yün said then that she had long heard of her reputation as a singer and would like to hear her sing. (Lin 1999: 69)

In this sentence, the noun “singer” corresponds to the verb “*ge*” in the Chinese text. Lin deliberately avoids the use of verbs. The effect it achieves is the same as the sixth example.

In summary, when Lin Yutang undertakes the translation task, he actually has formed pre-understanding of the distinction between Chinese and English, one being paratactic, human-oriented and dynamic, the other hypotactic, object-oriented and static, by virtue of his linguistic competence and his considerations of different culture, so that the original text is aggressed as soon as it is brought to the target text.

### Import

Translators are often caught in a dilemma when there is no equivalent in the target language to express the same exact meaning of the original. To achieve the best translation, the translator turns to import, the third move in the translation process. In the third step, domestication and foreignization are two translation strategies that a translator tends to choose from to ensure the translation quality and avoid absurdity.

Import by domestication “entails translating in a transparent, fluent, invisible style in order to minimize the foreignness of the TT” (Munday 2012: 218). This is similar to what Schleiermacher describes that “the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him” (Lefevere 1977: 74). As there are many culture-loaded words and some customs that are exclusive to China, many foreign readers will fail to comprehend if Lin translates literally, so domestication is what Lin usually adopts whenever he encounters them.

- h. Since the Book of Poems begins with a poem on wedded love, I thought I would begin this book by speaking of my marital relations and then let other matters follow. (Lin 1999: 3)

This sentence tells readers why the writer speaks of his marital relations first. Considering that foreign readers have no idea of “*San Bai Pian*” and “*Guan Ju*” for lack of cultural understanding, Lin uses “Book of Poems”, a broad and more acknowledged term, to inform readers of what “*San Bai Pian*” refers to. And “*Guan Ju*” is translated into “a poem on wedded love”, so that readers can be aware of the genre and the content of it, which is more important than just knowing the title.

Foreignization is a “highly desirable...strategic cultural intervention” seeking to “send the reader abroad” by making the receiving culture conscious of the linguistic and cultural difference (Venuti 2008: 15-16). “This is to be achieved by a non-fluent, estranging or heterogeneous translation style designed to make visible the presence of the translator and to highlight the foreign identity of the ST” (Munday 2012: 219). In the English version of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, Lin preserves some foreignness in the target text, enabling target readers to better appreciate Chinese culture.

- i. And so every day we rubbed shoulders together and clung to each other like an object and its shadow, and the love between us was something that surpassed the language of words. (Lin 1999: 15)

In this sentence, the writer employs simile, comparing himself and his wife to an object and its shadow, to show the closeness and genuine love between them. It is not an uncommon simile in Chinese literature when literary writers want to show their sincere relationships with others. In the English text, Lin transfers it into “clung to each other like object and its shadow”, leaving the foreignness in the original text intact and making foreign readers have a closer look at Chinese language as well.

To sum up, Lin Yutang imports by domestication and foreignization either to make what is hard to understand in the source text more understandable to target readers, or to expose target readers to the foreignness embedded in the source text.

### Compensation

After trust, aggression and import, balance between the source and the target will be somewhat lost. Therefore, compensation becomes a necessity. There are two main ways to restore the equilibrium in Lin's translation process.

The first technique is amplification. As a matter of fact, many deep meanings and implications in Chinese language are hidden from the surface. We Chinese can grasp the hidden information by intuition. However, if the hidden information in the Chinese text is not revealed in the English text, foreign readers will have a sense of strangeness or loss when reading it. This renders translators a responsibility to compensate by giving a detailed explanation with additional words. The same is true of Lin Yutang who endeavors to achieve a balance when translating.

- j. Strange to say, when I got on to the boat and was on my way home, I felt that a quarter of an hour was like a long year. (Lin 1999: 19)

By adding "strange to say" in the beginning of the sentence, Lin Yutang accurately catches the writer's mood at that time. Although there is no word that has something to do with the "strange" feeling, we Chinese can infer it from the Chinese character "fan". Suppose that Lin doesn't add "strange to say" to the English text, foreign readers will fail to catch the writer's psychological activity. If so, it would be a pity both for the translator and the target readers.

- k. Over the bridge, there was an open hall overlooking the water, called "After My Heart"- the reference was to an old poem: "When the water is clear, I will wash the tassels of my hat, and when the water is muddy, I will wash my feet." (Lin 1999: 19)

Such words as "After My Heart", "the reference was to an old poem" are added by Lin to make the English text more understandable. "After My Heart" is not translated directly from the Chinese text but from the hidden meaning of the text based on Lin's own understanding. As for "the reference was to an old poem", Lin intends to point out where the following sentence comes from. Without this reference, foreign readers would feel bewildered, waiting for some explanations, though it is self-evident when reading the Chinese text or is redundant in the Chinese text.

The second technique is annotation. Annotation means adding short notes to a book or a piece of writing to further explain. Translators usually use this method to broaden target readers' horizon, open target readers to a broad cultural context and cope with troubles like linguistic difficulty and historical background. Some examples of annotation are quoted below.

- l. Even if I cannot accompany you to the Five Sacred Mountains<sup>①</sup> then, we can travel to the nearer places, like Huch'iu and Lingyen, as far south as the West Lake and as far as north as P'ingshan [in Yangchow]. (Lin, 1999: 47)

<sup>①</sup>The Five Sacred Mountains are: (1) "Taishan, the East Sacred Mountains (in Shantung), (2) Huashan, the West Sacred Mountains (in Shensi), (3) Hengshan, the North Sacred Mountains (in Shansi), (4) Hengshan, the South Sacred Mountains (in Hunan) and (5) Sungshan the Central Sacred Mountains (in Honan). -Tr. (Lin 1999:47) As "the Five Sacred Mountains" are Chinese famous mountains, further introduction of them and their locations can help foreign readers have a basic understanding of Chinese geography. In the meantime, "Wu yue" has no equivalent in English. Although Lin translates it into "the Five Sacred Mountains", foreign readers still have little idea of them. Adding short explaining notes below will be conducive to demonstrating the status and fame of the five mountains. "in Yangchow" can also be seen as a kind of annotation, informing readers of the location of P'ingshan.

- m. On the seventh night of the seventh moon of that year, Yün prepared incense, candles and some melons and other fruits, so that we might together worship the Grandson of Heaven<sup>①</sup> in the Hall called "After My Heart." (Lin 1999: 27) <sup>①</sup>The seventh day of the seventh moon is the only day in the year when the pair of heavenly lovers, the Cowherd ("Grandson of Heaven") and the Spinster, are allowed to meet each other across the Milky Way. - Tr. (Lin 1999: 27)

"Tiansun" in the Chinese text is translated into "the Grandson of Heaven" in the English text by Lin. He maintains the literal meaning without disturbing the original text. But "the Grandson of Heaven" has a different reference, different from what westerners usually refer to. Actually, it involves a Chinese folktale that is known to few foreign readers. To avoid ambiguity or misunderstanding, Lin adds a historical explanation in the annotation. In a word, Lin polishes his translation by means of amplification and annotation when there is an unbalance between the source and the target. By doing so, he also proposes certain implications to some other translators when they encounter the same difficulty.

### Summary

As a concluding part of this chapter, a few points deserve attention. Although these four moves are analyzed separately, they are, in fact, interdependent and indispensable. In Lin Yutang's translation, sometimes there are

two or more moves within one sentence, and sometimes one move is sacrificed to give way to another move or moves. Besides, a lot of lesson can be drawn from Lin's endeavor to achieve the best translation from the perspective of hermeneutic translation theory, such as his flexible handling of the target language, his accurate choice of words and the deliberate use of translation strategies or techniques and so on.

### Conclusion

George Steiner's hermeneutic translation theory offers a fresh perspective to analyze Chinese literature, especially those written in classical Chinese. After a detailed case study and illustration, there are some major findings.

Firstly, Chinese literature written in classical Chinese is always concise in form and colorful in meaning with more four-character phrases and culture loaded words. However, it is almost impossible for translators to realize both the conciseness and the colorfulness at the same time in the English version. Weighing the pros and cons, translators tend to give up the former to achieve the latter. Secondly, translators usually have to understand the original text by themselves before they start to translate, so that they are able to display the real intentions of the writer to target readers through translation supplemented by their own understanding when necessary. Therefore, from the source to the target, translators' own understanding of the source text will determine the way in which the target text is brought to readers. Thirdly, in George Steiner's hermeneutic four-fold motion, trust stresses a translator's investment of belief; aggression emphasizes the fact that the translator understands the original text from a foreign point of view; import underlines the way in which a translator brings the extracted source text meaning into the target text; compensation means that the translator's responsibility to restore the balance that is broken after the previous three moves. All these stages share one thing in common, that is, each of them highlights the translator's subjectivity.

Nevertheless, this study is by no means without its limitations. Therefore, further verification and intensive discussion are expected to be done.

To begin with, although Lin Yutang had spent ten years on the translation of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* and its revision, there are still a few flaws or mistakes in his translation, especially when it is analyzed by modern standards. In addition, the analysis of the original text is far from comprehensive and examples taken from it are typical but not enough. To exhaustively illustrate each move of the four-fold motion, the original text should be appreciated from cover to cover and more examples are needed. Furthermore, characteristics of literature written in classical Chinese that are summarized in chapter four can also apply to other genres of literature, as Chinese to English translations all share these general characteristics to some extent after all.

Apart from limitations, this study is also enlightening for the future translation practice and study. Regarding the literature translation practice, it is suggested that a translator should make himself aware of the purpose of his translation before he starts. Besides, a translator should improve his skills and competence if he wants to be qualified for literature translation. Most importantly, a competent translator ought to translate for the target readers' sake, either exposing readers to the foreign culture or demonstrating the charm of Chinese literature in an acceptable way. As to future literature translation study, other unique genres of Chinese literature should be analyzed or appreciated from the perspective of hermeneutic translation theory or a range of other translation theories. Moreover, Chinese literature translation studies should pay more attention to such factors as translators' subjectivity and cultural subjectivity in the translation.

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