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Review of Changbao Li's *A Parallel Corpus-based Study of Literary Self-translation*

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Self-translation as a literary activity can be traced back to the sixteenth century, when poets such as Joachim du Bellay (1522-1560) translated their Latin poems into their native language (for a review, cf. Grutman; Hokenson and Munson). Self-translation, as a form or category of translation, began to attract the attention of researchers in the field of Translation Studies in the 1980s. For example, Fitch studied the reception of Samuel Beckett's (1906-1989) fiction and essays in French and English. Subsequently, researchers began to focus on bilingual writers and their translations.

In China, self-translation¹ started late. It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century when several bilingual writers began to translate their works into foreign languages, and this kind of translation did not attract translation scholars' attention until the twenty-first century, so most research papers on self-translation concerning modern Chinese literature appeared after 2005. Despite the late start, studies on self-translation have developed fast in China, with a large number of papers approaching the topic from various perspectives (see chapter 2).

While self-translation has been studied widely, there are still problems associated with this type of translation. Most studies focus on one bilingual writer or one self-translated work, as a result, the scope of this kind of study tends to be micro (4).² There is no systematic and comprehensive research probing the psychological mechanism and theoretical background of self-translation. Moreover, methods used in these studies are traditional comparison and subjective analysis; new methods and paradigms of research are yet to be introduced. Aiming at solving such problems, *A Parallel Corpus-based Study of Literary Self-translation* is a timely addition to the scholarship on this topic. The author of this book, Li Changbao, a professor at Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics, studied self-translation and built the first self-translation parallel corpus (Chinese-English) in China. Based on parallel and comparable corpora, the book focuses on literary self-translation, and sets out to explore the features and essence of self-translation.

The book consists of an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion and appendixes. In the introduction, Li finds that although self-translation is recommended by some theorists as an ideal way of translation, it remains a marginal field of translation studies. There are two reasons: external and internal. The former is that self-translators usually enjoy greater freedom, which makes the target version less faithful to the original, therefore considered as rewriting, revision or recreation rather than translation. Then, due to the identity fusion of writer and translator, it is hard to distinguish between self-translation and rewriting, between translator and writer, and between source text and target text.

¹ From Chinese to foreign languages, not including self-translation from Chinese into other minority languages used in China.

² All quotations from this book are translated into English by the author of this paper.

In the first Chapter, Li deals with two problems in this field: the definition of self-translation and its category. Self-translation became a term in the *Dictionary of Translation Studies*, edited by Shuttleworth and Cowie (13) in 1997. As definitions of self-translation from other researchers vary greatly, Li aimed to balance them and give his own definition, which stresses three things: the fusion of writer and translator; the direction of translating; and the content of the work being translated. Regardless of the direction of translation, the content should be about the native land and memory; and while translating, the translator takes care to reproduce the theme and function of the original in the target context.

Is self-translation translation, or rewriting? To this question, there are three kinds of answers. Most researchers consider self-translation as translation, while scholars such as Bassnett and Lefevere see it as rewriting or revision. Other researchers such as Fitch call it “variant”, which is neither translation nor creation. To answer this question, Li took another road. He used Zhang Ailing’s fiction *Shame Amah* as an example, engaging corpus data to illustrate how self-translation both differs from and also resembles translation.

Zhang Ailing (1920-1995, also known as Eileen Chang) is a Chinese female writer who wrote in Chinese and English, and translated some of her own works. *Shame Amah* (桂花蒸, 阿小悲秋, literally “steamed osmanthus, Ah Xiao’s sad autumn”) was published in Chinese in 1944 and self-translated into English in 1962. In 2000, Simon Patton re-translated this novel into English as *Steamed Osmanthus Flower/Ah Xiao’s Unhappy Autumn*. Besides these two translated texts, Li also collected some English novels written by Zhang and by Nobel Prize laureate Doris Lessing (1919-2013). As such, Li has four corpora to compare. After comparing the type/token ratio, frequency of content words, proper names and lexical density of the corpora, Li found that self-translation not only shares the same features of translation, but also enjoys greater freedom and has more traces of creation.

In Chapter 2, Li gives a literary review of self-translation studies. He found that studies in the western world focus mainly on bilingual writers and their works. Though started late in China, studies on self-translation are more diverse in scope, including, among others, ontology, receptional aesthetics, intertextuality theory, and markedness theory. From the review, Li argues that both studies in China and elsewhere deal with “micro issues” (53), for they usually focus on only one bilingual writer or one work. Li concludes that more systematic and comprehensive studies are needed, with proper research paradigms and tools.

In chapter 3, Li introduces Husserl’s phenomenology and Gadamer’s hermeneutics as his theoretical basis. Li takes two notions of Husserl’s phenomenology, namely intuition and intentionality as the philosophical basis of self-translators’ subjectivity. As the main characteristic of consciousness is that it is always intentional, the process of translation is the emergence of intentionality (61), and since every translator has their own intentionality, everyone gets their own different translations. From Gadamer, Li borrows three concepts: historical interpretation, fusion of horizons, and effected history. Gadamer argued that meaning and understanding are not objects to be found through certain methods but are inevitable phenomena (Palmer 163). As people have historically effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*), and they are embedded in the particular history and culture that shaped them, their interpretations are bound to be historical. In other words, readers cannot escape their pre-understanding or established “prejudice” while interpreting. As such, interpreting a text involves a fusion of horizons: the text’s horizon and the interpreter’s horizon. In the process of translating, the two horizons – the translator’s and the writer’s – will never be completely fused, because the translator will never fully understand the intention, aim or sense of the writer (63). Li therefore thinks that the “historic nature” and “timeliness” are essential for understanding self-translators’ interpreting of text (65).

Chapter 4 presents readers with a large quantity of data from his corpus. The Chinese-English Self-Translation Parallel Corpus (CESTPC) collected the works of ten Chinese bilingual writers that were published between 1930 and 2001. CESTPC comprises two sub corpora of self-translation: from Chinese to English (twenty-nine texts, three million tokens) and from English to Chinese (thirty-six texts, three million tokens). It is a parallel corpus with sentences aligned, and properly tagged for the purpose of research.

Based on CESTPC, using corpus tools and methods, Li conducted numerous comparisons and analyses between self-translation and other-translation; and between translated and original texts. Textual features tested and analysed include vocabulary, sentences, paragraphs, discourse, narration and plots, proper names, and language style. There are several interesting findings regarding vocabulary, sentence features and paragraphs. With regard to vocabulary, Li finds that self-translation shares the features of all translated texts, but enjoys greater freedom and displays a trend of simplification. For sentence features, he finds evidence to prove that self-translators' subjectivity is more obvious, which means that self-translators pay more attention to the reproduction of the theme of the original text and interfere more actively while translating. At the level of paragraphs, self-translated texts usually delete, add or rearrange the original ones, while other translations usually keep the original arrangements, which also attests to the freedom of self-translators. Other findings, such as the use of fewer conjunctions in translated English texts, the habit of punctuation usage, and the change of appellation and names, are consistent with self-translators' ambient translingual (Hokenson and Munson 13-14) identity.

Chapter 5 is a theoretical analysis of the psychological mechanism, intersubjectivity, intertextuality, and the criteria and strategies for self-translation. The fusion of writer and translator creates a double ego which brings about the above features of the target texts. There are three subjects in translation activities: writer, translator, and reader. Then in self-translation there are only two, but this does not mean a simpler intersubjectivity. Self-translators, unlike other translators, need to be faithful to themselves but not the source text (175), because when they are translating, they tend to improve or revise the original text so as to properly convey their intention. Moreover, they also need to take readers into account since their aim of translating is to reproduce the work in the target context, therefore, their operational strategies tend to be reader-oriented.

In the concluding chapter, Li summarizes what he has found from the CESTPC and the theoretical analysis, in addition to a list of limitations and suggestions for further study. This book's contribution to the field of self-translation studies, or translation studies in general, is manifold. Firstly, the author redefines self-translation and its category through an empirical and systematic way. Secondly, the use of corpus and corpus tools sets a new paradigm for this field. Thirdly, by employing some notions of phenomenology and hermeneutics, it tries to explore the philosophical and theoretical nature of self-translators and their translations.

Despite its merits, this book would have made a greater contribution to the field if the following aspects had been taken into account. Firstly, the theoretical analysis and the data from the corpus have a loose bound. There are only bottom-up inferences, i.e., from data to theoretical explanation; the research could clearly be complemented by some top-down hypotheses and proofs. Secondly, while comparing data, for example, the word frequency, the author did not conduct a statistical significance test, which is a standard procedure in empirical studies. Thirdly, the texts collected cover a significant range of time (1930-2001), during which the Chinese language had changed, especially the process of simplification of written Chinese. Therefore, the comparability of texts in the CESTPC can be affected. In addition, only two languages, Chinese and English, were involved in this study, however many minority languages could also contribute to this field.

A Parallel Corpus-based Study of Literary Self-translation provides a comprehensive, systematic and in-depth probe into self-translation. The theory and methods used in this study are thought-provoking, and the book is undoubtedly a good resource for scholars and students of translation studies.

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