

Who Has the Right to Rewrite?—A Study on the Translation Strategies of an ST and TT Writer

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Abstract: This paper intends to make an analysis of “Yu Xi”, a narrative prose written by Xiao Qian and the writer’s own translation “A Rainy Evening”, and argues that in literature translation, as long as one has the ability to produce a faithful translation, s/he should have the right to rewrite, making adaptations in the TT, whether s/he is the ST writer or other translators. The paper includes a general introduction to the rewriting theory, answers the question “what is rewriting”, and discusses the topic “who has the right to rewrite” in detail.

Keywords: Rewriting; ST and TT writer; Xiao Qian; “A Rainy Evening”

Introduction

With the progress of society, the development of the translation studies is on the rise as well. In the past few decades, the translation studies has been approached from various perspectives and many novel theories have been brought up, such as the polysystem, deconstructionism, and post-colonialism theory. The rewriting theory is also an important one. Since the day *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* written by André Lefevere, was released, the term “rewriting” became a buzzword and the rewriting theory drew wide attention from scholars both at home and abroad. Many people started to worship this new theory. 41 Master Dissertation Research Papers on rewriting theory have been found in the CNKI database. However, opposing voice can be heard as well, for fearing of the over-empowered translator and freely manipulated rendering.

This paper intends to make an analysis of “Yu Xi”, a narrative prose written by Xiao Qian and the writer’s own translation “A Rainy Evening”(2001)^[1], and argues that, in literature, if the source text and target text writer has the right to rewrite, other translators or target text writers are entitled to do so as well.

1. What is rewriting?

1.1 The definition of rewriting

In the book *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, Lefevere makes the following description about rewriters:

Rewriters have always been with us, from the Greek slave who put together anthologies of the Greek classics to teach the children of his Roman master, to the Renaissance scholar who collated various manuscripts ... to publish a more or less reliable edition of a Greek or Roman classic; ... from the twentieth-century translator trying to “bring the original across” cultures, ... to the twentieth-century compiler of “Readers’ Guides” (Lefevere, 1992)^[2].

According to Lefevere, “Rewriting is anything that contributes to the constructing the ‘image’ of a writer and/or a work of literature (ibid.).” In his eyes, “all writings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way(ibid.).” To him, “rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspects can help in the evolution of literature and a society (ibid).”

In the *Advanced Learner’s English—Chinese Dictionary (6ed)*, the term “rewrite” is defined as “to write sth. again in a different way, usually in order to improve it or because there is some new information” (2005)^[3].

In fact, the word “rewrite” has two layers of meaning, namely the broad sense and the narrow one.

Broadly speaking, “rewrite”, means to write something again. The poststructuralist Julia Kristeva has proposed a theory presumes

that all texts share the characteristic of intertextuality, which means every text is a borrowing or transformation of the prior texts and an existing linkage among texts can be found, especially for literary works (Qin, 2006)^[4]. Based on this theory, all kinds of creation of texts, such as adaption, translation or even writing original works can be classified under the subject of “rewriting”, for all of these activities are carried out on the basis of the preoccupations and knowledge on the part of the rewriter and the production of these rewritten texts are resulted from the prior texts.

As for its narrow sense, it refers to the specific rewriting or editing techniques, such as omission, addition, summary, etc.

1.2 Translation is rewriting

After clarifying the definition of rewriting, now it is time to identify the nature of translation. As an ancient activity, translation is an important component of human civilization and translators have been exploring its nature for thousands of years.

Catford defines translation as “the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL) (Catford, 1965)^[5].” Nida and Taber’s definition of translation is based on preserving the effect of the original. “Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style (Nida & Taber, 1969)^[6].” Newmark regards translation as a craft “consisting in the attempt to replace a written message and /or statement in one language by the same message and /or statement in another language (Newmark, 1982)^[7].” Toury argues that translations are “facts of one system only: the target system” and “translation is a norm-governed activity (Toury, 1985)^[8].” The discussion of what translation is never ceased.

Although these definitions are different in words, they all agree that translation is an activity to convert the source language into target language, using another language to deliver the message contained in the source text, to write the source text again, which fits the broad sense of “rewrite”. Therefore, the conclusion can be easily made that, “translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text (Lefevere 1992)^[9].”

However, this only proves the fact that translation is a kind of rewriting by nature. What about the narrow sense of rewrite? Can source texts be rewritten in a more specific way? Do translators have the right to do so? Who has such kind of right?

2. Who has the right to rewrite?

2.1 Does the source text (ST) and target text (TT) writer have the right to rewrite?

Surely, a writer has the right to rewrite when composing its original work, but whether the ST writer has the right to rewrite its text while reproducing the TT is a question. Hereby, an analysis will be made of “Yu Xi” and its English version “A Rainy Evening”, both written by the famous Chinese writer—Xiao Qian, in order to seek the answer to the question.

Being the ST and TT writer at one time, Xiao is in the best position to interpret the ST and to produce the most faithful rendering. In fact, the English version is of high quality in terms of language and content and good enough to reflect the ST. However, rewriting traces can still be found. A thorough comparative analysis has been made of the Chinese and English versions. It shows that, in the TT, there are 29 additions, 18 omissions, 16 adaptations and 7 big rearrangements. Specific analysis is as follows.

2.1.1 Omission

Although the translation is produced by the ST writer, much information is cut off for the sake of the effect of the whole passage. Quite a number of such examples can be found:

Example 1: He goes in side, forgetting all the etiquette he has been taught; squeezing the water from his hair, <rubbing his damp palms together, he shushed his breath across the threshold of safety.> he whispers to himself, “Gosh, how wet it is!” Then perhaps <forgetting the wretchedness of the run just now, forgetting the reason for hurrying home, and puffing on the hot air.> he picks up a log, settles down by the doorway, folds his arms and begins to enjoy the beauty of the rain.

In this part, the central meaning is preserved, while some Chinese-way of actions underlined in the angle brackets are omitted in the TT.

Example 2: The rain ... was getting thicker and thicker. Through the down-pour we watched the stalks of corn, beaten almost to the ground <like the whip in the hand of our teacher.>

The underlined part in the bracket is cut off when producing the English rendering, Xiao may consider that, a teacher holding a feather whip is unnecessary to be presented to the Western readers, which may diminish the readability of the TT.

2.1.2 Addition

Although much information is omitted in the TT, more extra messages are added to increase the readability, bridge the cultural differences and make the TT a complete work itself.

Example 3: To be fair, rain has often been a blessing. How many poor scholars on their way to take part in the imperial examinations have been caught in the rain, sheltered in some deserted temple by the roadside, and encountered fairies? Others have taken refuge in

the guest-chamber of some great household by a bamboo grove. Then the “pearl-in-the-palm” of the household looked through the window of her boudoir and fell in love with the shabby scholar at first sight. In the rhododendron grove by moonlight they contrived to meet and pledged themselves to wed or die. The timid maiden thrust a jade ring into the scholar’s hand and then they parted; it was a ray of hope for the elegant but barren boudoir and an inspiration for the one who was on his path to fame...

In this case, first, the underlined topic sentence is added at the beginning of this paragraph in the TT for two purposes. One is to serve as a cohesive device for the text, the other is to suit the English way of writing.

Second, the underlined explanatory information and plots about the romantic stories happened between scholars and young ladies are added. In this way, the TT is tailored for the Western readers. These anecdotes are familiar to the Chinese readers but novel and fresh to TT readers. By doing so, the cultural gap can be shortened. Meanwhile, readers’ curiosity is aroused and the readability of the TT is increased.

2.1.3 Adaptation

Apart from omissions and additions, these two most frequently employed way of rewriting, adaptation is another important strategy for the writer in his rewriting of the ST.

Example 4: “Gosh, how wet it is!”

The expression in the above TT is more idiomatic than a dry observation in the ST, “hey, it’s raining!” Context, language, readability and acceptability are all considered by making this adaptation.

Example 5: Her parents had all gone to the yellow earth and she had only a brother, as soft as a rotten peach.

In this case, an English idiom is employed to express the similar meaning of the ST, that the brother was useless and good for nothing. It sounds more idiomatic and easier to be accepted by the TT readers.

2.1.4 Rearrangement

Generally speaking, omissions, additions and adaptations are mainly rewriting the ST on the word level, while rearrangement deals with the structures of sentences and of paragraphs.

Example 6: There is something exciting about being caught in the rain. It is unpleasant to get wet, but life is a dramatic struggle, a race between two slender but determined legs and the threatening sky. The gray canopy above loses its temper and begins to frown; abruptly the dark clouds mass together like the vessels of a mysterious flotilla. Layer upon layer the blackness piles up, as if it must topple over on to the earth. ... Suddenly icy raindrops fall on his head and neck and shoulders, and when he puts up his head and neck and shoulders, and when he puts up his hand to feel them and water gathers on the back of his hand.

The first sentence of the ST states out the central idea of the whole passage, followed by a whole paragraph of descriptions of the natural environment—the sky and the clouds, the sound and the color. While the TT adopts a different arrangement—it combines two paragraphs into one and changes the sentence order to make it adapted to the western way of thought.

The language of Chinese is featured with the feature of high-context, and English low-context (Samouvar, 2004)^[10]. It is okay to devote a whole paragraph into scenery description, yet it is better to offer a topic sentence so as to help readers get the point. For this reason, when the ST is converted into English, many sentences and paragraphs are rearranged.

2.1.5 Others

Besides, other rewriting traces can be found in the TT.

Example 7: Her husband is the second son of the household of Du. They were betrothed when they were both children, and married the year before last. Then the second master went to some university in Beijing, a grand new place with all the new ideas.

Firstly, the Chinese title “Du Wu Ye” (the 5th master of the Du Family) is simplified as “Du” which is easier to understand for the western readers.

But the second change worth discussion. Can we simply translate “Yang Xue Tang”(College of western learning) into “university”? This may save the translator a few words of explanation, but the two terms do not seem to be interchangeable.

From the above analysis, we can see that being the ST and TT writer at one time, Xiao enjoy an incomparable advantage in translation. On the one hand, he is fully entitled to make adaptations of the ST which is his work. Therefore, his rendering is assumed to be the most faithful one. On the other hand, since he is not merely a translator, but also the ST writer, people will not judge him for misinterpretation. All the so called mistranslations are considered to be another creation, an embodiment of rewriting, and are acceptable.

To sum up, the ST and TT writer do have the right to rewrite in the creation of both the ST and the TT, since his rendering is a faithful reflection of the ST and serves to prolong the ST’s life.

2.2 Do other translators have the right to rewrite?

2.2.1 Faithful rewriting

Based on the above conclusion, anyone who has the ability to ensure the faithfulness and help the ST to expand its influence are entitled to rewrite the ST. Here comes the question, what does faithful mean?

As a key factor in defining translation and an important standard for good translation, “faithful” or “loyalty” has been discussed for years. Gradually, more and more people come to realize that the faithful is not limited to the mechanical word level equivalence, but to achieve one or more communicative functions in the TT context (Chen, 2000)^[11].

It is impossible for the TT writer to think and write as the ST writers do, but as long as s/he has the following ability, s/he is also qualified to produce a faithful rendering.

(1)The translator must have the ability to obtain relevant information, grasp the intention, achieve the functions of the ST in the TT and have the necessary knowledge about translation such as translation skills, strategies etc.

(2)The translator should be bilingual and have a good possession of cross-cultural communication abilities. He need to know the social and cultural background and social norms of the two countries.

(3)The translator also need be competent to understand the meaning of the ST and the intention of the ST writer. On the basis of these information plus the demands of the readers and text type to create a cohesive text which well demonstrates the pragmatic function of the ST and complies with the language norms, grammatical rules, and rhetorical devices of the TL (Jia, 2002)^[12].

As long as one meets these requirements, s/he is able to produce a faithful translation, even if s/he is not the ST writer. Therefore, s/he has the right to render the ST as the ST and TT writer does.

2.2.2 Afterlife of the source text

In the book *The Task of the Translator*, Walter Benjamin shares his observations:

A translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife. ... since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life. The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity. (Benjamin, 2000).^[13]

In view of Benjamin’s idea, each rewriting or translation prolongs the life of the ST. Deconstructionism conceives that signifier, the language, may generate countless signified interpretations on the part of the sign-readers. As the old saying goes, every one reads Hamlet in a different way. It is impossible for translators to think in the exact way as the ST writers do. Even the ST writer himself may come up with different ideas when they finished the writing of the ST and start to rewrite the TT. So the task of either the ST writer or the TT translator, or rewriter, is to present a picture and share unique idea to the readers. ST writers make a creation on the basis of their preoccupations and knowledge of prior texts, while TT writers write the ST again in different language, which is the presentation of the ST, his/her own interpretation, as well as the afterlife of the ST.

Therefore, as long as other translators have the ability to produce a faithful rendering of the ST, they also enjoy the right to rewrite—to make changes and adaptations in producing the TT, for what they do actually prolongs the life of the ST and should be encouraged.

3. Conclusion

All the translation is a product of rewriting. All the translators are making changes or adaptations purposely or unconsciously. The only difference is that whether the change is appropriate or inappropriate and whether it helps the ST be recognized and accepted by more people or blemishes the fame of the ST. As long as one has the ability to ensure the faithfulness of the TT, s/he has the right to make certain changes, whoever he is. In a word, the ST writers, ST and TT writers and TT translators all have the right to rewrite.

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