

**Review**

# Revisiting retranslation Hypothesis in Goethe's and Lu Xun's selected Works

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Goethe's contribution to studies on retranslation is his classification of (re)translations into three epochs, namely domestication, combination of domestication and foreignization, and foreignization. Lu Xun's is his emphasis on the absolute necessity of retranslating. Their ideas on retranslation have important implications for contemporary retranslation research.

**Keywords:** Goethe; Lu Xun; retranslation; classification; necessity

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## INTRODUCTION

In the history of world literature, at least two authors have discussed retranslation extensively: Goethe (Berman

1990: 4; Brownlie 2006: 148) and Lu Xun (Wu et al. 1995: 531, 532, 695). The former's discussion is somewhat

indirect but thought-provoking, while the latter's is direct and forceful.

### Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Goethe was a great writer as well as a translation theorist. His fragmentary and aphoristic remarks on translation in his 133 volumes of collected works have helped make the German theoretical tradition one of the world's richest bodies of work in the field of Translation Studies (Robinson 2006: 221). In his *West-Östlicher Divan* (1819), Goethe divides translation into three kinds:

1. The first kind of translation familiarizes us with the foreign country on our own terms.
2. In the second kind of translation one seeks to project oneself into the circumstances of the foreign country, but in fact only appropriates the foreign meaning and then replaces it with one's own.
3. In the third kind of translation one seeks to make the translation identical with the original, so that the one would no longer be in the *stead* but in the *place* of the other. (ibid: 222-223)

Goethe mixes the three concepts "kind", "approach" and "epoch" in his classification, although it seems that he lays more emphasis on "epoch" (*Epoche, Zeitalter*). In other words, the three kinds of translation are characterized by "temporal nature" and related to three "epochs". This is the very nature of retranslations that appear one after another. And his words "the appearance among us of Germanized foreigners like Aristotle and Tasso, Shakespeare and Calderon, even twice and three times over" affirm that he is actually talking about retranslation.

The first kind of translation is developed out of Goethe's concept of "prose translation", a kind of simple, meaning-oriented translation (ibid: 222). Adaptations are included, as in Wieland's translation of Shakespeare,

which turns poetry to prose and thus loses the original poetic properties. Stylistic contours in the ST may also be leveled down, as in Martin Luther's translation of the Bible, which, says Goethe, transforms the "stylistically most varied" ST into a more homogeneous target text (TT) (ibid). This kind of translation is oriented toward "youth", "everyone", or "the masses". It may be extended to the concepts of "gist translation" (Gouadec 2007) or "introduction" (Berman 1995), although Wieland and Luther generally follow the originals line-by-line.

If we really want to draw a line of distinction between the first and second kinds of translation, their difference lies not in the expression, where both of them use target terms to express the original ideas, but in the understanding, where the first kind of translation understands the ST from the standpoint of the target culture while the second does the same thing from that of the source culture. The difference in the stance of understanding unavoidably means that there may be more intentional or unintentional misunderstandings and misinterpretations in the first kind of translation than in the second. This justifies the existence of retranslation and implies that later translations of the same text have fewer mistakes or errors.

Goethe's third kind of translation is more metaphysical and difficult to grasp. It can link to the famous words of Fu Lei, a great translator in modern China, who held that "an ideal translation seems to be the work by the original writer in Chinese" (Luo 1984: 559, my translation). Or we may think of "the transmigration of souls", a term used by George Savile and Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (Qian 1997: 270). "Transmigration" is a Buddhist term that involves belief in re-incarnation, that is, the rebirth of beings, which have a previous life, in this life and a posterior life. This same person lives in different temporal-spatial worlds with the same soul but different appearances. In some sense, translations and retranslations are the incarnation of the ST in target language-cultures, with the same soul (i.e. content and spirit) and different forms (i.e. languages). The first and

second kinds of translation have merely taken over an incomplete soul of the ST and thus they are a derivative or at most a substitute of it. However, repeated translating of a text may result in the birth of a canonical translation that has achieved full understanding of the soul of the ST and can stand side by side with the latter, albeit in a different temporal-spatial world. This second possibility may lie behind the idea that target readers who know little or nothing about the source language (SL) can access the TT and enjoy a thorough understanding of the ST as original readers with no need to resort to the ST. The ST cannot replace the TT on such occasions, even if they coexist in the target culture. Perhaps Goethe wants to emphasize the perfect replacement of a canonical translation in appreciating great foreign classics. In my view, this may be the metaphorical sense of Goethe's "epoch".

If we look at the three kinds of translation from the dichotomy of domesticating and foreignizing translation strategies, it seems that Goethe's classification indicates a general process for translating great works in his day. Domesticating approaches to both understanding and expression are employed in the first kind of translation, or initial translations of a text. Foreignizing approaches to understanding and domesticating approaches to expression are adopted in the second kind of translation, or subsequent translations of the same text. The foreignizing approaches to both understanding and expression are employed in the third kind of translation, or a canonical translation because "clinging so closely to his original the translator more or less relinquishes his own country's originality" (ibid: 223). In other words, Goethe perhaps presents a general model or tendency in (re)translating foreign masterpieces: first domestication, then a combination of domestication and foreignization, and finally foreignization.

## Lu Xun

Lu Xun was one of the greatest writers in modern China. He was first of all a translator and then a writer, since he always translated more than he wrote as an original author (Sun 2011). He offered many insights on translation, especially on the translation principle, the function of translation and the classification of target readers. He wrote three articles discussing retranslation: "On Retranslation" (1933), "A Few More Words on Retranslation" (1933) and "On the Absolute Necessity of Retranslation" (1935) (see Wu 1995). In "On Retranslation" he first formulates his concept of retranslation (i.e. indirect translation or relay translation) and its function as follows:

English is in the first place and Japanese in the second among the foreign languages Chinese people know. Without retranslation we could only read many literary works from England, America and Japan and there would be no way for Chinese people to read Ibsen and Ibáñez. They would even know nothing about the popular children's tales by Andersen and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. (Wu 1995: 531, my translation)

A century ago, there were just a very small number of Chinese people who knew a foreign language, which was often English or Japanese. If people wanted to know works in other languages, such as Norwegian or Spanish, they had to read translations of them from the English or Japanese translations of these works. For example, Lu Xun translated Russian novels from their Japanese versions, as was the case with Gogol's *Dead Souls*. This is actually a kind of "indirect translation" ("间接译" in Lu Xun's words). It is viewed as retranslation by scholars such as Gambier (1994: 413) and Shuttleworth and Cowie (1997: 76), and in agreement with the description of "retranslation" in the Nairobi Recommendation (1976), which states that "as a general rule, a translation should

be made from the original work, recourse being had to retranslation only where absolutely necessary”.<sup>1</sup> In “On the Absolute Necessity of Retranslation”, however, Lu Xun develops a further concept of retranslation and offers suggestions on how it should be carried out:

Even if there is a good translation of a text, its retranslation is still necessary. It is self-evident that those works translated in classical Chinese should be retranslated in vernacular Chinese. Even if translations available are fairly good, they can be retranslated if later translators think that they can translate better. [...] A nearly complete finalized translation can be successfully produced through reference to the strengths of the previous translations and addition of the new insights of their own. However, due to the change of language with the times, new retranslations will occur in future. It is not surprising at all that a text can be translated seven or eight times. In fact, no work has so far been translated seven or eight times. If it should be the case, China’s New Literature and Art will not be so lifeless and stagnated. (Wu 1995: 696-697, my translation)

Here, Lu Xun develops his understanding of retranslation, moving from indirect translation to the concept that a text is translated seven or eight times.<sup>2</sup> He does not clarify whether the translation is via the source language or a

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<sup>1</sup> See Part V of the Recommendation at

[http://www.catti.net.cn/2007-09/06/content\\_75240\\_2.htm](http://www.catti.net.cn/2007-09/06/content_75240_2.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Lu Xun used *chong yi* (重译) in 1933, which literally means retranslation but is an equivalent to indirect translation in meaning.

Then he used *fu yi* (复译) in 1935, which literally also means retranslation. In Chinese, “重” and “复” are synonyms, meaning “again”. In this study, I will adopt the concept of *fu yi* that refers to the phenomenon that a text is translated several or many times.

third language. His advice on how to perform retranslation touches upon one of the purposes of retranslating. Retranslators should not be so arrogant as to ignore the merits of existing translations, such as unique understanding of the minute and subtle places in the ST or ingenious expression of original ideas, which they might not achieve easily in their work. Lu Xun proposes that retranslators should incorporate those merits into their own translation. Then, they should have their own idiosyncratically different understanding of something in the text that previous translators have not grasped. Finally, they combine all these in their linguistic operation and produce a “nearly complete finalized translation”.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Goethe holds that great literary texts tend to undergo a similar retranslating process in which first translations of the texts are target language and culture-oriented, then some retranslations contain a few foreign features in the source text and finally some other retranslations are biased toward the source language and culture. This general feature in (re)translating literary works is still found in today’s literary translation. Lu Xun is one of the writer-translators in modern China who place much emphasis on the necessity of retranslating literary works. But he claims that retranslators should not plagiarize earlier translations of the same source text. Unfortunately, a number of translators in contemporary China have been shamelessly plagiarizing existing translations for commercial considerations.

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