A comparative study of English translations of Lu Xun’s works

Xu Xiaomin
Shaanxi Normal University

Lu Xun (1881–1936), a foremost representative of the May Fourth Movement, was also the most important writer and translator in modern China. Japanese Nobel Laureate Oe Kenzaburo called Lu Xun “The greatest writer Asia produced in the twentieth century.” His thirty collections of writing, in addition to another ten volumes of his translations, are “weapons” to awaken the people and to change the national character (Lundberg 1989: 41) and “to awaken the people in the iron house from the danger of being suffocated” (Lu Xun 1980a: 38).

Lu Xun was born in Shaoxing, a small town in a southern province of China. His childhood witnessed the decline of China after the Opium Wars in 1840s and the Anglo-French War in 1860. Early in 1902 he went to Japan to study medicine, where he found the foremost thing to change the situation in China was to change the people’s minds (Lu Xun 1980a: 35). So he turned to literature.

Lu Xun’s literary works can be divided into four types. The first type was his translations. Lu Xun never really stopped translating until the last year of his

1. I would like to express my thanks to Professor Maria Tymoczko for her help and encouragement.
2. Lu Xun, in some translations, may be Lu Hsin, Lu Hsün, or Lusin. I use Lu Xun in this paper consistently for convenience.
life. He translated works form Russia, Japan, and Eastern European countries to encourage and enlighten Chinese people, including stories, novels, plays, and children’s literature.

The second type is Lu Xun’s research works, 《汉文学史纲要》 (Han wenxue shi gang yao, Outline of the history of Chinese literature) and 《中国小说史略》 (Zhongguo xiaoshuo shi lue, History of Chinese fiction).

The third type is best known, namely his literary work, which was mostly accomplished in his earlier period, mainly stories, prose, prose poems, and poems. These works constitute his three collections of stories 《呐喊》 (Na han, Call to arms), 《彷徨》 (Pang huang, Wandering), and 《故事新编》 (Gu shi xin bian, Old tales retold), two collections of prose and prose poems 《野草》 (Ye cao, Wild grass) and 《朝花夕拾》 (Zhao hua xi shi, Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk), and a collection of his poetry. Among them, 《呐喊》 and 《彷徨》 are repeatedly translated.

The fourth type is his essays, commentaries, and letters, which amount to dozens of collections and constitute a large part of Lu Xun’s works. These have usually been regarded as the more ideological writings of Lu Xun.

Lu Xun’s writing is unique in style, which adds much difficulty to translation. Lu Xun preferred to write in colloquial Chinese, but he was educated with classical Chinese when he was a child. Moreover, in order to achieve ironic effects, he used a stylized colloquial, studded with words, phrases, and whole quotations from classical Chinese (Lu Xun 1990: vl). The sharp contrast of colloquial and classical language in his works makes his writings especially difficult to translate. Lu Xun’s sarcasm and double meaning are also tough for translators, so his translators have to know how to “translate between the lines”. The cultural notes in Lu Xun’s works are also important in translation, filled with allusions, quotations, and current events and people.

Introduction to the English translators of Lu Xun

For a writer with the highest reputation a Chinese writer can get, Lu Xun and his works have been researched and translated for over eighty years.

Since the 1920s his works have been translated into English. An English translation of 《阿Q正传》 (A Q zheng zhuan, A True Story of Ah Q) by a Chinese American Liang Sheqian was published in 1926, and was the first English translation of Lu Xun’s stories. Later on, a British writer, E. Mills translated several stories

4. In the article, I use Chinese names and Pinyin for the original works to avoid confusion, since different translators had different translations, and I also add Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang’s English translation to the names for the convenience of the readers who do not know Chinese.
of Lu Xun from a French version into English, with a title “Ah Qui and Other stories”, in 1930. Another one that achieved a lot in Lu Xun’s works is by Edgar Snow (1905–72), a famous American journalist. His translation of Lu Xun can be found in his book Living China. There are also other names which I tend to omit since they are not very closely related to this study. Among all the Lu Xun translators, the three most influential are Chi-chen Wang, Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, and William A. Lyell, Jr.

Chi-chen Wang (1899–2000) was born in Shandong, China. He went to America as an oversea student in the 1920s and later became a teacher in the US. In 1929, he published an abridged translation of the most famous Chinese novel 《红楼梦》 (Hong lou meng, The Dream of the Red Chamber). Though not a complete translation, it won him great fame because of his concision and fluency, and it helped the spread of the novel. In 1941 he published a collection entitled “Ah Q and Others” issued by Columbia University Press, which consists of eleven of Lu Xun’s best stories taken from Na han and Pang huang. Later on he translated another two stories of Lu Xun. As a man standing between Chinese culture and Western culture in the 1930s and the 1940s, and a translator who produced gorgeous translations of Lu Xun’s 13 stories in the 1940s, he no doubt deserves attention.

In mainland China, Yang Xianyi (1915–2009) and his wife Gladys Yang (1919–99) are the most important Chinese-English translators in China after 1949. They translated almost all the most important literature works in China, including a complete version of Hong lou meng, with the English title A Dream of Red Mansion and Lu Xun’s works. They are the only translators of Lu Xun in mainland China, the only translators who translated Lu Xun’s works systematically, and they translated almost all Lu Xun’s works. Yang Xianyi went to Oxford in the 1930s to study Greek literature, where he met an English girl named Gladys Margaret Taylor, who later became his wife as Gladys Yang. They came back to China in 1940. In 1954, after the establishment of the PRC in 1949, they were employed by Foreign Languages Press as professional translators to translate the important Chinese literary works into English systematically. Their translations of Lu Xun were published during the years they worked for the Foreign Languages Press. They cooperated in translation, a practice lasting their whole lives: Yang Xianyi made the first draft of translation, while Gladys proof-read and typed.

The most recent renowned translator of Lu Xun is William A. Lyell (1930–2005), a recognized authority known worldwide for his work on such major mod-

---

5. They are a couple and collaborators. Most of their translations were under the names of them two. For convenience of statement, I tend to regard them as a whole.
6. See Yang Xianyi (2002), the 27th chapter.
7. See Yang Xianyi (2002), especially the first 28 chapters.
ern Chinese writers as Lu Xun. He is not only a translator of Lu Xun but also a researcher of Lu Xun. He published not only translations of Lu Xun *Diary of Madman and Other Stories* and translations of other modern Chinese writers, but also critical studies of Lu Xun, including *Lu Xun’s Vision of Reality*.

The reasons I chose these three translators are the following: (1) They were the most influential Lu Xun translators. (2) They lived in different historical periods. Wang’s translation was published in 1941; most of Yang’s translations of Lu Xun were published during a period between the 1950s and the 1960s, and revised and new reprints appearing constantly till the 1980s; Lyell’s translation was published in 1990. They stood for different stages of time. (3) They had totally different socio-cultural backgrounds. Wang was a Chinese American and the first to introduce Lu Xun to Americans; the Yangs were the only Lu Xun translators in mainland China and their translations were inevitably branded with the socio-cultural characteristics of mainland China. Lyell, an American scholar of Lu Xun, was more scholarly in translating Lu Xun. (4) Based on their background and purposes of translation, their production turned out to be strikingly different.

**Lu Xun’s Translators: motivations and objectives of the translations**

Translation must “make a compromise” between the original and the target system and the degree of compromise depends on the reputation of the writer being translated within the original system (Lefevere 1982: 7). So the position of the writer was the foremost consideration for Lu Xun’s translators, influencing their translations greatly though usually unconsciously.

In Wang’s times, China was still a remote mysterious country living in old tales to many western people. Although there were already translations of Lu Xun in English and other Western languages (Wang Jiaping 2009), the western people, even the intellectuals, were still unfamiliar with Lu Xun. And more than that, although Lu Xun was already very famous in China, he was not yet canonized. Therefore, in translation, Wang had much freedom in interpreting Lu Xun in the way he understood him.

As a Chinese translator only 19 years younger than Lu Xun, Wang was familiar with the setting of Lu Xun’s writings. He explained his motives of his translation as follows.

One of the best ways of arriving at a real understanding of a country is undoubtedly through its literature, the richest, the most revealing and most imperishable of nation-

---

al heritages. In these stories of Lusin, acclaimed greatest of modern Chinese writers in his own country, the reader will be able to get glimpse of China through the eyes of one of its keenest and most original minds (Lu Xun 1941: vii).

Wang was excellent at introducing Lu Xun to Americans as “the greatest modern Chinese writer” when Lu Xun was just a noted writer in China and almost obscure in the Western world. Apparently, Wang translated with the purpose of having his readers in the West know China not as the legendary remote country, showing the weakness and potential strength of a modernizing China through Lu Xun’s writings.

As Lefevere indicates, a culture assigns different functions to translations of different texts. In addition to the status of the source text that they are supposed to represent in their own culture, translations are supposed to function in ways that also depends both on the audience they are intended for and the status of the source text (Lefevere 1990: 8).

In the introduction of Ah Q and others, Wang writes:

The stories of Lu Xun will not, therefore, interest those who think of China as a dead civilization with only a past to recommend it; they will interest even less those to who China represent an idea and a perfection . . . (Lu Xun 1941: ix)

His translations of Lu Xun were addressed to “those whose interest in humanity goes deeper than its outward trappings” and “who are tired of the unreal and impersonal representations of life that the average admirer of China finds so charming in traditional Chinese literature and art (Lu Xun 1941: ix).”

In 1940, in mainland China Mao Zedong commented on Lu Xun:

(Lu Xun was) the chief commander of China’s cultural revolution, he was not only a great man of letters but a great thinker and revolutionary. Lu Xun was a man of unyielding integrity, free from all sycophancy or obsequiousness; this quality is invaluable among colonial and semi-colonial peoples. Representing the great majority of the nation, Lu Xun breached and stormed the enemy citadel; on the cultural front he was the bravest and most correct, the firmest, the most loyal and the most ardent national hero, a hero without parallel in our history. The road he took was the very road of China’s new national culture.9

The lengthy comments of Mao clearly influenced the image of Lu Xun in China for decades. “They did not make Lu Xun famous----that he was already----but it added much more political meaning to Lu Xun’s works after the establishment of People’s Republic of China, making him sacrosanct” (Marie Chan 1975: 268). When Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, the Yans for short, translated Lu Xun in mainland China in the 1950s and 1960s, they felt ideological pressure coming now and then from Foreign Languages Press and other directions.

The establishment of PR of China in 1949 put an end to the history of the Chinese being colonized and humiliated, but meanwhile the country was isolated from international affairs and had no embassy relationship with the West. To introduce Chinese literature and culture, the Foreign Languages Press (FLP) was founded in 1952. It was affiliated with the General Administration of Press and Publications under the leadership of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.\textsuperscript{10} The General Administration of Press and Publications defined the task of the Foreign Languages Press as follows: “The Foreign Languages Press is a national organization whose task is to publish works in foreign languages for the purpose of international propaganda.”\textsuperscript{11} The Yangs worked for the FLP for decades, and most of their translations were published by the FLP.

As professional translators of an official publishing house, their tasks were to produce cultural products that would “mold public opinion” of Chinese literature in the globe and “to produce propaganda” (Tymoczko 2006: 442). Lu Xun was one of the first writers they chose, because Lu Xun was their favorite writer and by every means the most important modern Chinese writer. The Yangs published their translations of Lu Xun, the four-volume \textit{Lu Xun Selected Works}\textsuperscript{12} in the 1950s and the 1960s. Meanwhile, the country was excluded from the international affairs, and the only way they knew of their target cultures and readers was radio and newspapers. Readers in the West were unfamiliar to them, since the Yangs had been away from Europe for so long. Gladys Yang said, “. . .we are working for people invisible to us. . .we are not only translating for Americans or Austrians, we are also working for those readers in Asia and Africa who understand English. So we do not know who our readers really are (Wang Zuoliang 1989: 89).” Without knowing their readers and the changed society of their readers, they had no readers’ response to judge their works, and did their translation in an awkward way.

Lyell is the most recent translator. He is an expert on Lu Xun. Unlike the other two translators, who were pushed forward by their love of the country or political needs, he was more academic in his translation, which can be traced to his view of Lu Xun:

\textsuperscript{10} Hudong Baike, http://www.hudong.com/wiki/%E5%A4%96%E6%96%87%E5%87%BA%E7%89%88%E7%A4%BE


\textsuperscript{12} The title of the books were “Selected Works of Lu Hsun” in their first editions in the and were changed into Lu Xun Selected Works in later reprints.
He belonged to that in-between generation of intellectuals who had one foot mired in tradition while they tried to step forward into the modern world with the other. Very few of them would take that step as surely and unequivocally as Lu Xun. Theirs was a unique experience, at once painful and exciting. They lived on the edge of history in an environment that will never be seen again, an environment that produced many great men and women, and Lu Xun a giant among them. He was blessed with a quick, probing, and powerful mind, large enough to accommodate prodigious amounts of the old learning and the new. . . . But he was born in a age that fated him to destroy what those men had built so that he might find a better way for human beings to behave—a way for them to treat each other with honesty, compassion, integrity and love (Lu Xun 1990: vii).

In his times Lu Xun was already known as a famous Chinese writer in the West. With the end of the Cold War, the ideological meaning of Lu Xun’s works was weakened a lot in the intellectual world, at home and abroad. Therefore, although there were already versions of Lu Xun, Lyell wanted to provide a new translation for American readers. He translated the stories into American English with a detailed introduction; note on the pronunciation of the personal names also appeared in the stories (Lu Xun 1990: xlii).

**Selection of the originals**

As stated at the beginning of this essay, Lu Xun’s writings are mainly divided into four types. In addition to his translations, there are stories, poems and prose poems, and scholarly works, as well as essays, notes, and letters. As a translator, to select from such a variety of works is by no means an arbitrary activity.

Wang does not mention how and why he selected the eleven stories included in *Ah Q and others* from *Na han* and *Pang huang*, but in the preface of another book, *Contemporary Chinese Stories*, he wrote:

> I had tried to make this collection as representative as possible and have for that reason included a transitional piece more because of its faults than its virtues. On the whole, however, I have taken into consideration (1) the technical excellence of the stories as such; (2) the position occupied by the author by the general consensus; (3) the light the story throws on Chinese life and problems. I have also taken into account the availability of the authors in English translation. If the best of Lusin had not already been published in an independent volume, I would have given him much more space than I have. . . . (Chi-chen Wang 1944: viii).

The implication is clear: besides the two stories included in the book, more of Lu Xun’s works met the “technical excellence”, “shedding light”, and “availability” conditions of the collection. It is reasonable to think that in choosing Lu Xun’s works in *Ah Q and Others* he followed the same or similar principles.
A comparative study of English translations of Lu Xun’s works 331

For the Yangs, by contrast, to translate a writer like Lu Xun was not simply a case of translation. The editor of the four-volume *Lu Xun Selected Works* said in the preface:

...Lu Xun’s sixteen volumes of essays and three collections of stories, prose poems and reminiscences form an encyclopedia of Chinese society, the people’s life and struggles, ...They constitute, above all, a bold declaration of war against imperialism and feudalism, against all oppressors of the people, and all the dark, corrupt forces which would obstruct China’s advance (Lu Xun 1980a: 28).

Therefore, of the three translators being discussed here, only the Yangs translated Lu Xun’s essays. In Yang Xianyi’s autobiography, he mentioned that restrictions he met when selecting the originals:

Unfortunately, since we were in essence employed merely as hired hands and since the selections were made by young Chinese editors whose knowledge of Chinese literature was rather limited or because the selections had to suit the political taste of the period, many such translations done by us were not worth the time spent on them. I only chose classical Chinese literature, so I was often lucky with my choices. However sometimes even classical poems were chosen for their “ideological” or “political” content, and we often argued with the editors about their choices, reaching compromise only after lengthy discussion (Yang Xianyi, 2002: 202–203).

The Yangs complained about the selection of the originals in their translation experience, but no complaint for the selection of Lu Xun’s works. For Lu Xun’s works, Yang Xianyi wrote in his autobiography:

Probably the most important piece of translation was the four-volume edition of the selected works of Lu Xun, the most significant writer and thinker of modern China. In 1954 I was introduced to the Communist writer Feng Xuefeng, who had been a good friend of Lu Xun. Together with him a selection of Lu Xun’s writings was chosen and translated. Feng and I selected and Gladys and I translated. Feng was a veteran Communist who had been imprisoned by the Kuomintang in a concentration camp for many years before Liberation. I liked him very much. He was a very gentle man and a man of great passion and moral integrity (Yang Xianyi 2002: 188).

Luckily for the Yangs, they liked Lu Xun’s works; and even more luckily, they had the assistance or guidance of Feng Xuefeng, the editor of the four-volume *Lu Xun Selected Works*, a great writer and a friend of Lu Xun. The Yangs were satisfied with the selection, even though their foremost and first concern was to be able to fulfill the propaganda task required by the country.

In 1956–61, the four-volume *Lu Xun Selected Works* was published: the first volume includes Lu Xun’s stories, prose and prose poems, and the other three volumes are all essays, which was seen as important at the time because “The class struggle and revolutionary problems of these years are also reflected more accurately and comprehensively in the essays than in the stories (Lu Xun 1980a: 26)”
As time passes on, the deficiency of the collection appeared: it laid too much stress on the essays. In the four volume translation, only one volume is composed of the most brilliant part of Lu Xun’s works, the stories, prose and prose poems, while three-fourths of the translations are essays, commentaries, and notes on the various topics. Though these essays are also great works of thought and literature, demonstrating the humor and talent of Lu Xun’s nature, they are not as interesting to read as the stories.

Following the four-volume *Lu Xun Selected Works*, the Yans published a series of translations of Lu Xun’s collections: *Call to Arms* (*Na han*), *Wandering* (*Pang huang*), *Wild Grass* (*Ye cao*), and together with *Selected Stories of Lu Xun*, published in 1972, including exactly the same eighteen stories included in the four-volume *Lu Xun Selected Works*, *Selected Writings of Lu Xun*, a collection of Lu Xun’s essays and *Silent China*, a selection of stories, poems, and essays by Lu Xun. Works included in these books were mostly the same as those in the four-volume set, with slight changes in translation.

Lyell commented Lu Xun’s essays as “terse, incisive, satirical in tone, and inimitably idiosyncratic”, and “no contemporary of Lu Xun was able to match his achievement in this essay form, either in clarity of thought or brilliance of style” (Lu Xun 1990: xxvii). But Lyell translated all the stories in the two most famous collections of Lu Xun’s stories, *Na han* and *Pang huang*, as well as an early story Lu Xun wrote in classical Chinese, and totally ignored other genres and another collection of stories 《故事新编》 (*Gushi xin bian*, Old tales retold). Lyell did not explain why he did not translate the essays of which he says highly. But in a couple of paragraphs in the introduction of *Diary of Madman and Other Stories* he used a variety of expressions to refer to Lu Xun’s essays in addition to the Chinese pinyin “za wen”: political essays, short and biting essays, daggerlike zawen, scalpels, politically charged pieces. Seemingly, he holds the same view with Feng Xuefeng, the editor of the Yans’ *Lu Xun Selected Works*, that Lu Xun’s essays are more political than stories. Lyell also indicates that Lu Xun’s stories are more “cultural than political” (Lyell 1976: 182). As an American translator after the Cold War Period, it is reasonable to conclude that Lyell chose to translate stories instead of essays because the stories are more cultural than political.

**Translation strategies**

Lefevere argues that translations are never produced in an airlock, where they and their originals, can be checked against the tertium comparationis in the purest possible lexical chamber, untainted by power, time, or even the vagaries of culture.
Rather translations are made to respond to the demands of a culture, of various groups within the culture (Lefevere 1990: 7). The three translators, as receivers of both the translation brief (commissioner’s instructions) and the source text (Nord 1997: 21) in their totally different socio-cultural background and historical stage, contributed different translations.

In their remarks about their Lu Xun translations, Wang and Lyell admit that translating Lu Xun was difficult because of Lu Xun’s unique style and excellence in techniques (Lu Xun 1941: xxiv; 1990: xli) they produced their own Lu Xuns, which were also the production of their times.

Wang translated the stories into fluent American English (Lu Xun 1990: xlii) with a simplified rendering of the culture-bounded elements. His translation was the most frequently read version of Lu Xun, which greatly enhanced the spread of Lu Xun’s works in the US. His translation became more than translation. It is a collaborative job, and *Ah Q and Others* is as much Wang’s book as it is Lu Xun (Kao 1942: 281)

No record shows whether the Yangs had read Wang’s translations of Lu Xun before they started their own translations, but Wang did pave the way for the Yangs. With the knowledge of Lu Xun through Wang’s version, westerners could accept the Yangs’ translations more easily. With the support of the FLP they worked for, the Yangs translated almost all the important works of Lu Xun in his four-volume *Lu Xun Selected Works* and the other collections published later. The Yangs’ translations are generally admired for their precision and fluidity (Denton 1993: 175). And they are said to be “the best textbook for introducing Lu Xun to Chinese literature classes and for the students who cannot grasp fully the subtleties of Lu Xun’s play with diction, the Yangs’s solid translations is there to help out” (Hegal 2003: 174). At the same time, the Yangs’ translations were also criticized for being too literal, too stiff, and too formal. Moreover, the British renderings of their translations have further alienated American readers from an already foreign text (Denton 1993: 174).

Lyell attempted to recreate Lu Xun’s style and the same feeling when reading the original. In trying to create the kind language Lu Xun used in writing, the mixture of classical and colloquial language, Lyell used a variety of methods: inflated style, italicizing certain words or phrases, rhyming certain lines that were not rhymed in the original, or a combination of these devices (Lu Xun 1990: xli). His Americanized English is also praised for making the stories more accessible to the North American readers (Denton 1993: 174).

Let us look at how they translated the following sentence taken from *《阿Q正传》* (A Q zheng zhuan):
总而言之，这一篇也便是“本传”，但从我的文章着想，因为文体卑下，是“引车卖浆者流”所用的话，所以不敢僭称，便从不入三教九流的小说家所谓“闲话体题言归正传”这一句套话里，取出“正传”两个字来，作为名目，即使与古人所撰《书法正传》的“正传”字面上很相混，也顾不得了。（《呐喊：阿Q正传》）

Zong er yan zhi, zhe yi pian ye bian shi “ben zhuan”, dan cong wo de wen-zhang zhuxiang, yinwei wen ti bei xia, shi “yin che mai jiang zhe liu” suo yong de hua, suoyi bugan jian cheng, bian cong bu ru san jiao jiu liu de xiao shuo jia suo wei “xian hua xiu yan gui zheng zhuan” zhe yi ju tao-hua li, qu chu “zheng zhuan” liang ge zi lai, zuowei mingmu, jishu yu guren suo zhuang “shu fa zheng zhuan” de “zheng zhuan” zi mian shang hen xiang hun, ye gu bu de le. Taken from (Na han: A Q zheng zhuan)

The sentence explains how the title of the story 《阿Q正传》 (A Q zheng zhuan) was chosen. The translation of the sentence is critical for the title of the story. The features of the three translations can be sorted out based on the following examples taken from the sentence:

1. **文体卑下，是“引车卖浆者流”所用的话**
   *wen ti bei xia, shi “yin che mai jiang zhe liu” suo yong de hua.*
   
The style of the piece is humble and low, using the language of peddlers and carters.

Wang: This piece may possibly be considered an official biography, but since it is written in the vulgar language of the street, I dare not usurp that title.

The Yangs: In short, this is really a “life,” but since I write in vulgar vein using the language of hucksters and peddlers, I dare not presume to give it so high-sounding a title.

Lyell: Of course I don’t dare forget my place and call it that, for the style is “vulgar” and the language I’ve cast it in is not the language of the classics but rather the “vile vernacular of mere rickshaw boys and peddlers”.

Obviously, Wang’s translation only provided the general meaning of the part, and omitted 引车卖浆者流 (yin che mai jiang zhe liu, those who make a living by huckstering and driving carts), which was taken from a story in a Chinese history book from the first century BC. The Yangs’ translation can be considered the closest version of the original if specific readers’ acceptability is not considered. Lyell’s translation is not only a so-called equivalence of the original segment, but also provides the sarcasms and background of the part: usually “a worthy written work” should be in the language of classics.
In Wang’s translation, 不入三教九流的小说家 (bu ru san jiao jiu liu de xiao shuo jia), which literally means “novelist that does not belong to the mainstream schools of study” is translated into “humble storytellers”. The idiom 三教九流 (san jiao jiu liu, Three Religions and Nine Schools) is totally omitted, but the word “humble” made sense. The Yans give a very close translation, with a note to explain the meaning of “Three Cults and Nine Schools”, and added “novelists were not respectable”, which was the key point for the sentence. It is pretty clear and the omission of other “schools” wouldn’t make trouble for the readers. Lyell translated

---

13. The three cults were Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. The nine schools included the Confucian, Taoist, Legalist, and Mohist Schools, as well as others. Novelists, who did not belong to any of these, were considered not quite respectable.

14. The three doctrines are Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. The nine schools are (1) Confucian, (2) Taoist, (3) Yin-yang, (4) Legalist, (5) School of Names, (6) Mohist, (7) Alliances and Strategies, (8) Miscellaneous Writers, and (9) Agriculturalist.
the part in a way similar to the Y angs, only a bit more wordy. He translated 三教九流 (san jiao jiu liu, Three Cults and Nine Schools) literally, and added a similar note to the phrase. But, he used a “lowly souls” to describe “storytellers” to give the finishing touch.

3. 即使与古人所撰《书法正传》的“正传”字面上很相混，也顾不得了。
   ji shi yu gu ren suo zhuo “shu fa zheng zhuan” de “zheng zhuan” zimian shang hen xiang hun, ye gu bu de le.
   Even if the title may be mixed up with the “True Story” from “True Story of Calligraphy” written by the ancients, there is nothing left to do about it.)

Wang: omission.
The Y angs: “Enough of this digression, and back to the true story”; and if this is reminiscent of the True Story of Calligraphy of the ancients, it cannot be helped.
Lyell: And if “real story” in this context gets mixed up with the “real story” in that book left to us by the ancients, The Real Story of Calligraphy—well, sorry, I just don’t have the time to worry about all that.

The three translators were consistent in their styles: Wang omitted those he regarded as not crucial to avoid so many unfamiliar elements in his translation; the Y angs provided a close translation, without adding much explanation nor omitting much, and Lyell made the translation a little bit wordy, but easy to understand. That explains why the three translations of the same Chinese sentence are so different in the length, as Wang totals 52 words, the Y angs’ 89, and Lyell 171 words!

Taking a sentence from another story 《祝福》 (Zhu fu, New Year Sacrificing) as an example:

他是我的本家，比我长一辈，应该称之为“四叔”，是一个讲理学的老监生。
   ta shi wo de ben jia, bi wo zhang yi bei, ying gai cheng zhi yue “si shu”, shi yi ge li xue de lao jian sheng.
   He is of the same clan with me and higher than me in generation rank so I should call him Fourth Uncle. He is a former student in Imperial College, studying Neo-Confucianism.

The sentence is short, but it is difficult to translate, because it contains three difficult words: 本家 (ben jia), 理学 (li xue), and 监生 (jian sheng). Table 1 makes a comparison between the three different translations of the three words.

We can see from the chart that Wang used “kin” to translate 本家 (ben jia), but they mean different things. In Chinese, 本家 (ben jia) only refers to people having the same family name, while in English, kin does not indicate whether or not people having the same family name even though they may be relatives. And, in Wang’s translation, the other two tough phrases were omitted, because it is difficult
A comparative study of English translations of Lu Xun’s works

A very moral and righteous old graduate
A former Imperial Academy licentiate
Old Imperial Collegian

Who believes in Neo-Confucianism
Follower of of Neo-Confucianism

Wang My kin A very moral and righteous old graduate
The Yangs In our clan A former Imperial Academy licentiate Who believes in Neo-Confucianism
Lyell My clansman Old Imperial Collegian Follower of of Neo-Confucianism

Table 1. Three translations of 本家, 理学, and 监生

both to translate and to understand them. The translator was very creative in rendering them into “a very moral and righteous old graduate”, which contained no difficult cultural notes, but grasped the irony and humor of the author properly: the Uncle Fourth is a learned traditional intellectual and a very hypocritical person.

The Yangs’ translation is similar to that of Lyell. The Yangs added notes only to their translation of 理学, but Lyell to both 理学 and 监生. Their notes are also worth comparing. The Yangs’ note is only a very simple introduction of the term, but Lyell gives a much more scholarly explanation of the nature, development, and influence of 理学. However, both the Yangs and Lyell miss the crucial point of the passage: the ironic tone of Lu Xun in mentioning Fourth Uncle as a follower of New Confucianism, for an important principle of New Confucianism is to suppress human desire.

It is also interesting to note that Wang, as the first influential English translator of Lu Xun, wrote an excellent introduction as the preface of the translation, including a brilliant introduction and commentary on Lu Xun and his works, and on others’ translations of Lu Xun for readers’ reference. He admitted that Lu Xun’s works were very difficult to translate because “the humor and the ironical twists and turns that he gives to classical allusions and contemporary slogans (Lu Xun 1941: xxiv).” Moreover, he also provided a glossary of the Chinese words and terms he introduced into his translation, which he regarded as self-evident, for those readers who might need it. He also explained that he used the Wade system of transliteration for actual names and a simplified Wade system for other names or Chinese words (Lu Xun 1944: ix). There is no doubt that the introduction helped a lot in the popularity of his translation.
The Yangs wrote little about their translations, though usually an article by others or an editors note was included in their translations: there is *Lu Xun: his life and works* written by Feng Xuefeng as the preface to the first volume of the four-volume *Selected Works*, editors notes in the other three volumes, and, another article *Lu Xun’s Life and His Short Stories* written by Ye Yichun in the *Selected Stories of Lu Xun*. It is a pity that the translators themselves did not include an introduction of their own to their translation, but such articles functioning as prefaces were usually seen as so ideological that they ignore the literary part and translation problems, and not of much help for the readers’ understanding. The lack of translators’ introductions or reflections over their translations is a great loss for the readers.

Lyell includes a wonderful 34-page introduction and a note on pronunciation in *Diary of Madman and Other Stories*. Besides a detailed introduction of Lu Xun and his stories, Lyell writes about the problems he encountered in his translation. He talks about general problems like Lu Xun’s style and his own ways of dealing with the problems, and explaining in detail about the tenses used in translating Lu Xun’s work (Lu Xun 1990: xli). His tone is friendly and informal, as if discussing a problem with friends.

**Conclusion**

As the most talented writer in modern China, Lu Xun deserves all praise and attention. The translators of Lu Xun discussed in the paper also deserve research and investigation, not because they translated the famous Chinese writer Lu Xun, but, because under diverse circumstances, in their respective political, social and cultural background, they produced their versions of most difficult writings in terms of translation.

Their translations are different, because they lived in different historical periods; they had different positions in viewing Lu Xun and his works; they translated for their specific purposes and readers; and, they represented their understanding of Lu Xun with their stylized translations. As the frontier of introducing Lu Xun to Americans, Wang was obviously very target system oriented, using Americanized English, avoiding difficult cultural notes to be reader-friendly, which helped a lot in the popularity of Lu Xun in the West. The Yangs, by contrast, who translated for a nation-sponsored publishing house, had more restrictions. They translated more closely, not only what Lu Xun said, but also how he expressed himself. Their translations are fluent, faithful to the original, and serious, with few personal remarks. Lyell, an American scholar of Lu Xun, had more freedom in his translation. Owing to his research, he included the most addition to his translation and produced a more scholarly version.
I am not to judge which one was good or not. I’d rather conclude the paper with Lefevere’s words: translations made at different times tend to be made under different conditions and turn out differently, not because they are good or bad, but they have to be produced to satisfy different demands (Lefevere 1990:5). Their translations might be praised or criticized, but, they have been there, have played their roles, and fulfilled certain purposes.

Bibliography


Guan yu zhongyang yiji chubanshe zhuanye fengong ji qi lingdao guanxi de guiding 《关于中央一级出版社专业分工及其领导关系的规定》 (Provisions on the divisions of work and affiliations of the national publishing houses) <http://baike.baidu.com/view/49499.htm>


Abstract

This paper compares three translators, Chi-chen Wang, the Yans, and William A. Lyell, who translated Lu Xun, the most important and a canonized Chinese writer in the twentieth century, so as to examine how non-linguistic factors affect translation.

Beginning from the introduction of the divergence of the translators’ identities, motivations and socio-cultural background, the paper analyzes the reasons of their preferences in selections of originals, different translation strategies and different translation products.

To introduce real China to the Americans in the 1920s, Wang translated the best stories of Lu Xun into fluent American English, with the difficult and unimportant cultural terms simplified or omitted. The Yans worked for a nation-sponsored publishing house on mainland Chi-
na and their translations of Lu Xun in the 1960s were attached with much political significance, which partly explained the closeness and literalness of their translation. While Lyell, an American scholar translating Lu Xun in the 1990s, is more scholarly in his translation, containing very detailed explanations and notes of cultural elements.

This paper is not to judge but to find out how translations are like what they are under certain circumstances and in certain historical periods.

**Keywords:** Lu Xun twentieth-century canonized Chinese writer, comparative study of three English translations, non-linguistic factors

**Résumé**

Cet essai vise à comparer trois traducteurs ; Chi-chen Wang, les Yang, et William A. Lyell, qui ont traduit Lu Xun, l’écrivain chinois le plus important et le plus canonique du XXe siècle. L’objectif est d’examiner l’incidence des facteurs non-linguistiques sur la traduction.

En commençant par une introduction sur les différences entre les identités, motivations et origines socioculturelles des traducteurs, l’essai se propose d’analyser le choix dans la sélection des originaux, les différentes stratégies de traduction, et les différents produits de ces traductions.

Pour initier le public américain à la Chine authentique dans les années 1920, Wang a traduit les meilleures histoires de Lu Xun en Anglais américain courant, en simplifiant ou en omettant les termes culturels de moindre importance. Les Yang, eux, travaillaient pour une maison d’édition parrainée par l’Etat en Chine continentale, et leurs traductions de Lu Xun dans les années 1960 sont fortement marquées sur le plan politique, ce qui en explique en partie le caractère littéral et leur proximité avec le texte source. Chez Lyell, un universitaire américain qui traduit Lu Xun dans les années 1990, les traductions sont davantage académiques, en cela qu’elles fournissent des notes et des explications très détaillées sur les éléments culturels.

Cet essai n’a pas pour but de porter un jugement sur ces traductions, mais plutôt de les mettre en relation avec certaines circonstances et périodes historiques.

**Mots-clés:** L’auteur chinois du XXe siècle LuXun, étude comparative de trois traducteurs en anglais, incidence des facteurs non-linguistiques

**About the author**

Xu Xiaomin, a teacher in Shaanxi Normal University, China, got a M.A on translation in Shaanxi Normal University in 2002 and has been studying translation theory in the Translation Centre of the University of Massachusetts Amherst from 2009 to 2010. Her major research areas include translation theory and translation teaching. The ongoing project, sponsored by Shaanxi Normal University, is English translation of Chinese classical poems. Address: 97 Shaanxi Normal University, Xi’an, China 710062. E-mail: ripplexu@126.com