

# A New Interpretation of Chinese Versions of Stray Birds Based on Reiss's Translation Criticism

A Case Study of the Translations by Feng Tang and Zheng Zhenduo

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**Abstract**—The publication of Feng Tang's translation of *Stray Birds* has aroused great controversy, but there are still many excellent translations in Feng's version. Based on Reiss's theory of translation criticism, this paper analyzes Zheng Zhenduo's and Feng Tang's translations reasonably and comprehensively so as to point out the highlights of Feng's rendering from the perspectives of the intralingual elements including vocabulary, semantics, grammar and style and the extralingual elements such as the context, translation purposes and audience.

**Keywords**—*Stray Birds*; Feng Tang; Reiss's theory of translation criticism; version comparison

## I. INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore, a celebrated Indian poet, writer and social activist, was the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize in literature. His *Stray Birds* is universally recognized as "the most beautiful short poems", which has attracted much attention since it was published. *Stray Birds* has been translated into many languages and its Chinese version also had a great influence on the development of modern Chinese poetry. There are many versions of *Stray Birds* in China, but Zheng Zhenduo's translation is the most popular and influential. Although Feng Tang's translation was supported by some people, like Li Yinhe's recommendation that it was "the best Chinese translation of *Stray Birds* so far", [1] it still sparked a lot of criticism from scholars and readers for its "coarse words" and "disloyal to the original". However, throughout the whole text, there are also many excellent translations, showing people the poetic beauty of the original text and the spirit of the current era. At present, people negate Feng's rendering of *Stray Birds* only on account of Feng's colloquial phrases and racy words in his translation to capture public attention, which is too one-sided and unfair. Therefore, the author intends to make a relatively objective analysis of the two translations of Zheng Zhenduo and Feng Tang by means of Reiss's translation criticism theory aiming to provide a new perspective for readers to evaluate and analyze the two translations.

## II. REISS'S TRANSLATION CRITICISM THEORY

Katharine Reiss, the famous translator and scholar in Germany, is the founder of Functional Skopos Translation Theory. [2] She put forward many novel and unique translation theories, which were very enlightening. She established a set of reliable standards for the systematic translating evaluation in the book *Translation Criticism* — the Potentials and Limitations, and came up with text typology on the basis of the linguistic function theory by Bühler, the German linguist and semiotician. The model of Reiss's text types and its relevant translation standards has made a lot of contributions to the study of translation. The value of the theory lies in it is more objective and feasible compared with the previous abstract standards like "faithful to source text" and "dynamic equivalence" [3] Reiss lived in a time when many translators were engaged in the translation practice and research of a certain type of text. Therefore, they took their research conclusions in their respective fields as a universal translation standard and applied them to translations of other texts, which was quite unilateral and not objective. Therefore, based on text classification, Reiss established his own system of translation criticism. Reiss concluded that a single text had multiple language features, but focused on certain features, so she divided the text into three types: content-focused text, form-focused text and appeal-focused text. The content-focused text covers the science of humanity, nature, society and other fields of professional literatures. The form-focused text includes all works of art and literature, because when writing literary works, the author always resorts to various forms to achieve some kinds of artistic and aesthetic pursuits. The purpose of appeal-focused texts including various admonitions, propaganda, allegorical articles and various kinds of advertisements is to stimulate readers to respond accordingly.

In addition to the text type, Reiss also put forward the extralingual and intralingual factors should be taken into account when exercising translating criticism. The extralingual factors include the context, translation purpose, audience, etc., while the intralingual factors mainly refer to vocabulary, semantics, grammar and style. [4]

### III. AN ANALYSIS OF ZHENG'S AND FENG'S TRANSLATION OF STRAY BIRDS BASED ON REISS'S TRANSLATION CRITICISM THEORY

Reiss believes the precondition for translators to choose translation strategies is to analyze the text type, which is also the beginning of critics' objective and comprehensive translation criticism. [5] Obviously, *Stray Birds* as poetry anthology is the form of a literary text, therefore, it must be analyzed by such intralingual factors as vocabulary, semantics, grammar and style. In addition, some important extralingual factors can't be ignored, like the theme of the poem, the context, the author's background, the translators' translating purposes and the audience, etc. As is known to all, Zheng's Chinese version of *Stray Birds* is the most widely known, it is extremely challenging for Feng Tang to retranslate such a classic work today. It is very necessary and significant for him to show people a translation different from previous versions on the basis of being faithful to the original. In the following part, the author will make a comparative analysis of Zheng's and Feng's versions of *Stray Birds* from the perspectives of intralingual and extralingual factors, pointing out some advantages and virtues of Feng's translation.

Tagore: He has made his weapons his gods. When his weapons win, he is defeated himself. [6]

Zheng: 他把他的刀剑当作他的上帝。当他的刀剑胜利的时候,他自己却失败了。 [7]

Feng: 他尊他的剑为神。剑胜了,他输了。 [6]

The original and its translations are both analyzed from the perspective of vocabulary firstly. The word "God" can be found many times in Tagore's *Stray Birds*, and Zheng Zhenduo mostly translated it into "上帝" while Feng basically translated it as "神" in Chinese. The reason why the two translators have different interpretations of the word "God" is that the meaning of the word is relatively complicated in different contexts and it must be analyzed in combination with other extralingual factors. To begin with, the word "God" is obviously with religious connotation. When evaluating its translation, it is necessary to take into account the diversities in different civilizations and religions. Western religions are dominated by Christianity, and most people believe in God. In Chinese culture, both Buddhism and Taoism have faith in "Ghosts and Gods". At that time when Zheng lived, western culture was prevailing, which had great influence on Zheng and many other people. Therefore, in order to make the translation more acceptable to readers, Zheng translated "God" into "上帝". However, Feng Tang is faced with Chinese people today who no longer blindly worship western civilization, and are more receptive to all kinds of translations. Therefore, Feng chose domesticating strategy and translated it into "神". Considering the background and religious belief of Tagore, Zheng Zhenduo's translation of "上帝" (God) in this sentence is somewhat inappropriate. Tagore as an Indian poet always believed in pantheism although he ever studied in Britain and was influenced by western culture. He advocated that "Brahman" is the master of the world, while "God" is believed by Christianity. Therefore, it is improper for Zheng

to translate "God" into "上帝" while Feng Tang translated it as "神" which seemed more suitable. What's more, compared with Zheng's translation, Feng's translation is shorter in length by omitting the conjunction, and the six-character expression "剑胜了,他输了" is rhythmic in reading and concise in meaning.

Tagore: You smiled and talked to me of nothing and I felt that for this I had been waiting long. [6]

Zheng: 你微微地笑着,不同我说什么话。而我记得,为了这个,我已等待得久了。 [7]

Feng: 你对我微笑不语,为这句我等了几个世纪。 [6]

The two versions keep the same with the original text in the content, but there are also differences between them. First of all, more Chinese words are used to express the meaning of the original text in Zheng's translation, but Feng's translations are relatively concise. Besides, the different translations of "long" in the two versions should be paid more attention. Zheng's translation of "久" (long) in Chinese is literally correct, but seems bland to read without some sense of beauty. As Yang Wuneng once pointed out, translators can properly give full play to their subjectivity and creativity when translating as long as they are faithful to the original ideas and styles. [8] Therefore, Feng here translated "long" into "几个世纪" (several centuries), which conformed to the idea and style of the original text but made it more vivid, imaginative and meaningful.

Finally, it is necessary to figure out why Zheng Zhenduo and Feng Tang came up with completely different interpretations when translating the simple word "long". There is no denying it is extralingual factors that made the difference. Most of translators at that time translated foreign works to introduce thoughts and cultures of other countries to enlighten Chinese people. Therefore, in order to avoid translation mistakes, most translators adopted the method of "literal translation" and made few changes. Likewise, Zheng Zhenduo translated Tagore's classic *Stray Birds* and tried his best to restore and show the beauty of the poem in an original way of literal translation. In spite of many versions by Zheng perfectly conveying the artistic conceptions of *Stray Birds*, some of his translations are too faithful to the original text in forms, which seems long and tedious to read. Feng Tang always claims the subjectivity of translators should be kept and the artistic conception of a translation can be also created. Therefore, Feng translated the word "long" into "几个世纪" (several centuries), which was indeed more readable and artistic, thus providing a new interpretation for contemporary readers.

Tagore: The hurricane seeks the shortest road by the no-road, and suddenly ends its search in the Nowhere. [6]

Zheng: 风于无路之中寻求最短之路,又突然地在"无何有之国"终止了它的追求。 [7]

Feng: 台风在无路之路,  
走最便捷的近路,  
止于最荒芜之处。 [6]

In this poem, Zheng's and Feng's translation of "Nowhere" should be focused. "Nowhere" could be explained as "an unknown, distant or obscure place or state" while Zheng translated it as "无何有之国". The phrase is similar to the expression "无何有之乡", which comes from Zhuangzi, referring to "illusion and unreality". For the sake of the Chinese readers at that time, Zheng applied the domestication strategy to translated the word "Nowhere" into "无何有之国". However, the version is not in conformity with the cultural connotation and artistic style of the original and tends to confuse the readers today. Feng was just true to the original and translated it into "最荒芜之处" (the most barren place) which is more appropriate in the context and more conducive to people's understanding in current days. In addition, it is worth noting that the style of the translations, Zheng Zhenduo did not change the form of the original and restored the word order of it in line with his being true to the meaning and form of the original. While it is well known that the aesthetic sense in poetry is closely linked to the form and rhythm of the words. Inclined to the poetic form, Feng Tang translated the original text into the parallel construction of three short sentences and ended the sentence with three Chinese words "路" (Lu), "路" (Lu) and "处" (Chu) to produce the beauty of rhythm.

Tagore: Like the meeting of the seagulls and the waves we meet and come near.

The seagulls fly off, the waves roll away and we depart. [6]

Zheng: 我们如海鸥之与波涛相遇似地, 遇见了, 走近了。 [7]

海鸥飞去, 波涛滚滚地流开, 我们也分别了。

Feng:

我们走近,

海鸥和海浪相亲,

海鸥飞起,

海浪翻去,

我们分离。 [6]

From the perspective of grammar and style, it could be found that Zheng Zhenduo basically followed the word order of the original text and still translated it into two sentences. Feng Tang restructured the original and translated it into the style of short poem. The two translations can be attributed to the two translators' different translation thoughts and strategies. Zheng Zhenduo was always faithful to the original text, so literal translation can be seen frequently in his translation. Feng Tang thought that the Stray Birds shall be translated into the form of poetry featuring in rhyme. It was under this translation strategy that he translated the original text into poem and used the words of "近" (jin), "亲" (qin), "起" (qi), "去" (qu) and "离" (li) at the end of five short clauses showing the beauty of the rhyme.

Next, from the lexical level, the word "like" appears frequently in Stray Birds. Zheng generally followed the original and got its literal meaning, while Feng chose not to translate it in many cases. Taking the poem for example,

Zheng translated "like" into "如.....似的", which reserved its rhetorical meaning but the translation was relatively simple and dull. In order to translate it into poetic form, Feng did not translate "like" directly but made some changes to the word order of the original text. He put "我们走近" (we meet and come near) and "海鸥和海浪相亲" (the meeting of the seagulls and the waves) in parallel, which is also very common in Chinese classical poetry to express the figure of speech. In the rest of the translation, he also arranged the lines in four-character format based on the meaning of original, which seemed poetic and readable for Chinese audience.

Tagore: The sun goes to cross the Western sea, leaving its last salutation to the East. [6]

Zheng: 当太阳横过西方的海面时, 对着东方留下他的最后的敬礼。 [7]

Feng: 太阳将巡西洋

将最后的敬礼留给东方。 [6]

In terms of vocabulary, there was no any conjunction in Tagore's original and Feng's translation, while Zheng used the conjunction "当.....时" (when) to organize the translation. It is generally acknowledged that English is hypotaxis-prominent, while Chinese is parataxis-prominent. Therefore, in English, cohesion is generally regarded to frequently use various connectives or conjunctions while Chinese do not always express the meaning and semantic by conjunctions. Zheng Zhenduo believed he shall "be discreet — very discreet — to do the work of introduction", [9] when translating English to Chinese. Therefore, in his translation, the pronoun "its" was reserved and translated into "他的", and "cross" was literally translated as "横过". There are three words of "的" (of) in the whole translating sentence, which is rather tedious and not in line with the expression of Chinese. Feng, in contrast, did not completely adhere to the form of the original text in his rendering, but made his translation more readable by omitting many function words.

Considering extralingual factors, why Zheng added the conjunction to organize his version can be reasonably explained. The time when Zheng lived made him acclaim that europeanization of style was conducive to the improvement of Chinese literature [10] so he was faithful to the original text and do not make changes. Like many scholars at that time, the strategies of literal translation made some of his rendering tedious and long in the length of sentence. In contrast, Feng is loyal to the organizational form of the original and give readers a conciser translation with less functional words.

Based on Reiss's theory of translation criticism, the author analyzes the Zheng' and Feng's translations of Stray Birds from the perspectives of the extralingual and intralingual factors. Due to different backgrounds, audiences, translating purposes and so forth, Zheng Zhenduo and Feng Tang adopted different translation strategies, and gave different translations. It is worth noting that Zheng Zhenduo is more literally faithful to the meaning and form of the original text as a whole, while Feng Tang's version makes

more changes and new interpretation to the original text no matter in meanings or the form.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Through analyzing different translations by Zheng Zhenduo and Feng Tang, it can be found that Feng's translation also has many highlights deserved to be appreciated. In different times, translators should be encouraged and given more space to have new and excellent versions of classic works in line with the spirit of the time and the needs of readers. What's more, other than intralingual factors, extralingual factors must be also taken into account to get more reasonable assessments in translation criticism.

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