

Traitor or Rebel: A Translation Problem in Chinese about the Italian Proverb *Traduttore, Traditore*

Xin Chang^{1,*}

¹College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan 610065, China

*Corresponding author. Email: 786076019@qq.com

ABSTRACT

Bitterly criticized by celebrated translators from China and beyond, the famous Italian proverb *traduttore, traditore* (translator, traitor) has been regarded as a commendation towards translators by some Chinese scholars. This paper attributes this bizarre phenomenon to one main reason: the Chinese version of this proverb — translator, rebel, does not bring out its derogatory sense, leading to a commendatory comprehension as a result. Unlike the word "traitor" with its obvious derogatory meaning, the word "rebel" in Chinese, just like in English language, can imply commendatory or derogatory connotations in different contexts. But when it is a commendatory word, its English and Italian translation should be "rebel" and "ribelle", rather than "traitor" nor *traditore*". This paper holds that translators are not traitors and translation is not treason, which should be a shared view by both translation scholars and translators.

Keywords: *translator, traitor, derogatory meaning, traitor, rebel*

I. INTRODUCTION

Just like "les belles infidèles", an utterance created by the 17th century critic Gille Ménage, "*traduttore, traditore*" has also been used to censure translators for their unfaithful translation of the source text. The famous Italian proverb "*traduttore, traditore*", together with "unfaithful beauty", has been jumpingly alive, even today. And yet, for all their popularity, it is hard not to find these utterances are imbued with derogatory meaning towards translators, who, according to these sayings, unfaithful beauties at best, and traitors at worst.

II. *TRADUTTORE, TRADITORE'S* DEROGATORY MEANING FOR TRANSLATORS

For most of the celebrated translators, both in China and beyond, "*traduttore, traditore*" is an abuse rather than a statement, and in most cases, it is not true. For example, Mark Polizzotti, an American translator, literary critic, editor, poet, says in an interview that the reason for him to call his book "*Sympathy for the Traitor: A Translation Manifesto*" is because of that "famous, idiotic pun *traduttore, traditore*, which has poisoned attitudes toward translation for centuries"[1]. One of the most celebrated translators in America nowadays, Eliot Weinberger, describes "*traduttore, traditore*" as a "tedious Italian pun"[2]. And he hopes it could be put to rest forever. Gregory Rabassa, noted for his English translation of the works of Marcus Garcia, and largely responsible for the popularity of those works, once expressed his view on this pun in his *If*

This be Treason as a "cliché"[3]. Another American translator, who is also famous for the translation of Garcia, especially his *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Edith Grossman[4], once said that this utterance serves as an accusation upon all translators and people venerate it because of its longevity rather than its truiness.

From the impressions made by those Anglo-Saxon translators one can gingerly infer that *traduttore, traditore* is a pun that has derogative meaning for them, because by saying that they are "traditor", they are denounced as traitors. This Italian pun has been translated in English as "translator, traitor" or as "translator is a betrayer". And for some Chinese translators, who are experts in the Italian, when presented with this Italian saying, their response is, if not the same, quite similar to those from the English world. For example, Lv, one of China's greatest Italian translators, thought that *traduttore, traditore* "are harsh words towards translators, and it could make them feel ashamed"[5]. And for Tian, another well-known Italian-Chinese translator, in his foreword of his translation of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, "this saying is to make translators who are devoted to the translation business felt bitterly disappointed... and I hope that I will never be granted the appellation — traitor"[6]. And more than that, as early as the 16th century, the famous Renaissance French poet Joachim du Bellay in his *Défense et exemple de la langue française* wrote that the translators who "betray those whom they aim to reveal, tarnishing their glory, and seducing ignorant

readers by reading white for black" are more suitably called traitors than translators[7].

On the one hand, translators who are unfaithful to the author, producing unfaithful texts are prone to be called traitors, on the other, based on translator's ideological and political inclinations, they can become traitors, just as Tymoczko says that "it is the political and ideological agency of translators that is the most threatening to those in power"[8]. As Polizzotti summarizes in his book *Sympathy for the Traitor* that this Italian proverb betrays people's "underlying suspicion across many cultures that the middleman is either incompetent or up to no good"[9].

However, not all cultures in which translator and traitor are being inextricably linked together. In fact, this marriage between translator and traitor in the language of Italian rather than other languages has its own historical, cultural and lingual specificity. Because the church and the secular establishment, the political power play in Middle Ages' Italy had come to a degree that reached an unbelievable complexity[10]. And as the contemporary Italian-American philosopher Arthur Danto says, betrayal has been deeply etched in the unconsciousness of Middle Ages' Italy and "Nobody for whom English is a first language would be tempted to equate translation and treason"[2]. John Duval, a French-English translator, does not think of "translator, traitor" as an ideal translation of the Italian proverb *Traduttore, traditore*, to him, "Translator, traducer would be more faithful to the sound and have the advantage of an etymological kinship with the original"[11].

In short, in the eyes of translators both from China and West, what "*traduttore, traditore*" does is rebuking translators and depreciating the value of their work, because for them, not all translators produce unfaithful translations, not all translators are betrayers to the author. There are of course translators who distort the meaning of the words, skip paragraphs, producing bad translations as a result. These translators can be called traitors, as Loewy's[12] paper clearly showed this. For Nabokov, translators who produce unfaithful translations are committing "sins", and those translations of theirs naturally become "victims"[13].

III. "TRADUTTORE, TRADITORE" BEING USED AS A PRAISE IN CHINA

Although *Traduttore, traditore*, its English version — translator, traitor, has been a pun to criticize translators who get unfaithful translations produced, but however, it is, quite interestingly, being used as a praise in Translation Studies in China. This paper holds the view that the reason behind this bizarre phenomenon lies in the Chinese translation of this Italian pun. For example, scholars such as Shan[14], Luo[15], among

others, are of the view that in present days the translators get called traitors is a kind of manifestation that translators' subjectivity is being shown and their status being increased. And some scholars in China share the view with scholars like McElduff, who is in favor of the view that *traduttore, traditore* neatly expresses a fact — "the translator cannot help but betray his or her original, even if he or she seeks to be faithful"[16]. By saying that, what he means is that the absolute correspondence between the source text and the target text does not exist. And no matter they produce faithful translations or not, they are intrinsically traitors, because two languages and two cultures cannot be altogether identical. This view point might make some sense, but from the angle of translators, especially those celebrated ones, this kind of absolute word-for-word correspondence is never equated to faithfulness.

For Polizzotti, translating never refers to "following the original line by line — replacing each word with its nearest equivalent as if they were carpet tiles"[9]. For Grossman, "word-for-word transcription" would not lead to a translation, and "there isn't a self-respecting publisher in the world who would not reject a manuscript framed in this way"[4]. For Eco, the famous Italian philosopher, historian, literary critic and writer, thinks that if the English text says what he wants to say, even if it is not a literal translation from his work, he would deem it as faithful[17]. It becomes crystal clear that most translators in most scenarios do not take word-for-word correspondence as a way they would take when they are translating, and seldom would they acknowledge that word-for-word correspondence is a byword for faithfulness. So it is somewhat meaningless to stress the absolute correspondence between the source text and target text and say translators are all traitors just because there cannot be absolute correspondence in the two texts. If so, there cannot have been cultural communication for the humankind down the history in the first place.

The main reason for taking this Italian proverb as a praise is because in Chinese *Traduttore, traditore* is being translated as "Fan Yi Zhe Ji Pan Ni Zhe"(Translators, rebels). Whereas "Pan Ni Zhe" has the meaning of "Bei Pan Zhe"(traitor), it can also be imbued with commendatory meaning according to different contexts. In effect, the Chinese word "Pan Ni Zhe" is a bit like the English word "rebel", it can have derogatory or commendatory meanings in different contexts. When the English word rebel being used in a context which denotes commendatory connotation, it is usually being translated into "Pan Ni Zhe" or "Fan Pan Zhe". For example, *James G. Endicott: Rebel out of China* [18] in which the word rebel is getting translated as "Pan Ni Zhe"[19]. The English book *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*[20] in which the word "rebel" is also transcribed as "Pan Ni Zhe"[21] in the language

of Chinese. These rebels, such as Shelley, are someone with the courage to fight against the tradition or the authority of one society, and do what they deem as righteous. Eagleton once describes the Brontës as "free-spirited rebels".[22](Eagleton, xii) And its Chinese version, the word rebel is translated into "Fan Pan Zhe"[23]. What's more, the contemporary Italian philosopher Odifreddi, in his book *IL GIRO DEL MONDO IN 80 PENSIERI*, he describes the scientist Freeman Dyson as "Lo Scienziato Come Ribelle"[24], because of Dyson's book *The Scientist as Rebel*. And when this Italian book gets translated into Chinese, "ribelle" is being translated into its Chinese adjective form as "Pan Ni De", so the whole phrase is being translated as "Pan Ni De Si Xiang Jia"[25]. From this case one can see that when being used as a commendatory word to describe someone, the Italian word "ribelle" equals with the English word "rebel", and with "Pan Ni Zhe" or "Fan Pan Zhe" as its Chinese counterparts.

However, the word "Bei Pan Zhe" or "Pan Tu", unlike "Pan Ni Zhe", has no such positive meaning in Chinese contexts. It is a derogatory word through and through. For example, in the Chinese version of Auden's *The Dyer's Hand*, when talking of the English translation of Italian operas, the Italian word "traditore" is getting translated as "Bei Pan Zhe" in Chinese[26]. It's hard to escape the conclusion that when presented with the Italian pun "*traduttore, traditore*", or its English translation translator, traitor, especially when one is keenly aware that it is a phrase debasing translators, and that those translators do not like to be called "traitors", its Chinese counterpart has to be translator, traitor(Bei Pan Zhe), rather than translator, rebel(Pan Ni Zhe).

IV. CONCLUSION

Just like one Chinese scholar, Cao[27], a famous Chinese translator for his English-Chinese translation of Edgar Allan Poe, says in his monograph, when faced with this Italian pun, it is better to take it as a warning, a warning for translators. In order not to be crowned "traitor" (Pan Ni Zhe in Chinese), translators must translate with diligence and carefulness and not produce unfaithful translations. For many Chinese and Western translators, the Italian proverb "*traduttore, traditore*" is such an unpleasant phrase that they do not even want to hear. But unlike the English translation, the Chinese translation — Fan Yi Zhe Ji Pan Ni Zhe (Translator, rebel) has been used as a fact-statement, or a commendatory phrase on translators. Howard Goldblatt, one of the most celebrated Chines-English translators, is often being praised as "Pan Ni Zhe" in Chinese context. This paper holds that the reason for the misuse of this Italian proverb in Chinese context is because the translation itself. The Italian word "traditore" cannot be translated into "Pan Ni Zhe",

which, like the English word rebel, can arouse derogatory or commendatory meanings in different contexts. It is better to be translated as "Fan Yi Zhe Ji Bei Pan Zhe" in this proverb.

References

- [1] S.Vincent, "A conversation with Mark Polizzotti on revision, chance and the limitation of theory". *Translation Review*, 2018, 100(1):1-15.
- [2] E.Weinberger, "Anonymous sources (on translators and translation)" in Allen & Bernofsky (eds). In *Translation: Translators on Their Work and What It Means*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2013. pp.21-30.
- [3] G.Rabassa, *If This be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents: A Memoir*. New York: New Directions. 2005. p.3.
- [4] E.Grossman, *Why Translation Matters*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. p.64, pp.10-11.
- [5] T.Lv, "An opinion on literary translation and the study of literature". *World Literature (Shi Jie Wen Xue)*. 1991. (4): 288-294.
- [6] D.Tian,"The Devine Comedy and me" in Guo (ed.). *Notes of Books Translation*. p.8.
- [7] A.Manguel, Alberto. *A Reader on Reading*. Haven and London: Yale University Press.p.203.
- [8] M.Tymozcko, *Enlarging Translations, Empowering Translators*. London and New York: Routledge. 2014. p.216.
- [9] M. Polizzotti, *Sympathy for the Traitor: A Translation Manifesto*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press. 2018. pp.2-12.
- [10] B.Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 2015. pp.495-500.
- [11] J. Duval, "Proverbs". *Translation Review* 1996. 50(1): 23-24.
- [12] D.Loewy, "The translator as traitor: the strange doing of Paul Jagasich". *Translation Review*. 1995. (1): 39-49.
- [13] V.Nabokov, "The art of translation" in *Lectures on Russian Literature*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 2002. p.316.
- [14] Y. Shan, & W.Q., Fan. "Translator's ethic reflection with changing of translator's identity". *Journal of Central South University (Social Science)* 2017. 23(6):192-196.
- [15] X.F.Luo, *A Study of the Translator's Ethics in a Postmodern Context*. PHD. Hunan Normal University. 2012. p.1.
- [16] S. McElduff, *Roman Theories of Translation: Surpassing the Source*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013. p.75.
- [17] U.Eco, *Experience in Translation*. Alastair McEwen (trans). Toronto & Buffalo & London: University of Toronto Press. 2001. p.8.
- [18] S.L.Endicott, James G. Endicott: *Rebel out of China*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1980.
- [19] S.L.Endicott, James G. Endicott: *Rebel out of China (Chinese version)*. Li, Guoling etc.(trans) Chengdu: Si Chuan People's Publishing House. 1983.
- [20] M.Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background, 1760-1830*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1982.
- [21] M.Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background, 1760-1830*. Huang, M & J.D. Lu. (trans) Shen Yang: Liaoning Education Press. 1998.
- [22] T.Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës (Anniversary Edition)*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2005. p. xii.

- [23] T.Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (Anniversary Edition) (Chinese version). Gao, x.l.(trans.) Beijing: China Citic Press. 2019. p.5.
- [24] P.Odifreddi, *Il GIRO DEL MONDO IN 80 PENSIERI*. Milan: Rizzoli. 2015. p.140.
- [25] P.Odifreddi, *Il GIRO DEL MONDO IN 80 PENSIERI* (Chinese version) Yao.(trans) Beijing: Beijing United Publishing Company. 2019. p.290.
- [26] W.H.Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*(Chinese version). Hu, S. (trans) Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House. 2018. p.673.
- [27] M.L.Cao, *The Way of Translation: Theories and Applications* (Revised Edition). Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. 2013. pp.222-223.