



Su Dongpo in the English-Speaking World and the Chinese Context: A Study on the Image Disparity in Lin Yutang's *The Gay Genius* and Its Back-Translation

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Abstract. Spurred by digital media and consumer culture, Su Dongpo has become a sensation in the new era. The construction of Su Dongpo's image has gained widespread attention. While significant achievements have been made across various fields, the cross-disciplinary dialogue remains inadequate. This study employs close reading and comparative analysis to extract the defining features of Su Dongpo's portrayal. It draws on postcolonial translation theory and translator subjectivity theory to reveal the cultural mechanisms behind the construction of his image. This study finds that when a biography returns to the source language culture through translation, the image of the host will undergo second construction. *The Gay Genius* itself is a selective construction of Su Dongpo, while Zhang Zhenyu's Chinese translation is a reconstruction of this image. The image of Su Dongpo shifts between *The Gay Genius* and its Chinese translation because Lin Yutang wrote for Western readers and reshaped the sage to suit their expectations. The differences between the two Su Dongpo images are the natural outcome of writing for particular readers and translating for another. The Chinese translation offers a portrait that has passed through two distinct cultural filters.

Keywords: *The Gay Genius*, Back-translation, Su Dongpo

1 Introduction

Su Dongpo, a renowned poet in the Song Dynasty, is held in high regard by many for over the past millennium. Undoubtedly, Su Dongpo has become a hallmark of Chinese culture. The reason why the image of Su Dongpo never fades away through the currents of time is that the character portrayal of Su Dongpo differs across different eras and languages. The essence of the comparison of divergent images of Su Dongpo in various linguistic contexts lies in exploring what might exert an influence on the portrayal of historical figures when narrators from different times, each with a different target audience, tell a story at the same time.

Previous studies mainly focused on how individual stance and personal background have an impact on shaping the image of Su Dongpo. However, Wang argues that the

reception of Su Dongpo's works and his image was not a linear progression, but rather a constant process of negotiations and contentions of different discourses [1].

Besides, there are many studies that delve into trade-offs in Zhang Zhenyu's Chinese translation in terms of reshaping the portrayal of Su Dongpo. As one stylistic analysis notes, Zhang's translation prioritizes aesthetic expression in the target language through ornate rhetoric and a mixed classical-vernacular register, which inevitably involves trade-offs between fidelity to the original style and readability, as well as between cultural authenticity and linguistic elegance [2].

Moreover, existing research has systematically examined the historical evolution of the image of Su Dongpo. Xiaojun Tan's study investigates the image of Su Shi within the mobile game *Mo Hun* (墨魂, Ink Spirits) to analyze how game narratives challenge prevailing stereotypes while constructing a modern and relatable image [3].

Despite the significant success in different spheres, there is a low level of interdisciplinary communication. Biography studies have not paid enough attention to the translated literature, and the issue of imagery construction has not been addressed by translation research. The diachronic analysis of Su Shi does not involve cross-language comparison. This current research has not limited itself to the scope of the biographical and translation research but it has developed a comparative analysis model between authors and translators that demonstrates the interaction of cross-cultural writing and translation. It may also serve as a point of comparison regarding the spread of Chinese culture overseas and its translation into other languages.

The present paper considers and analyzes the original English version of *The Gay Genius* and its Chinese translation by Zhang Zhenyu as comparative texts with an emphasis on the difference between the portrayal of Su Dongpo characters. This paper uses parallel comparison to examine how the translation of the historical figures of China into English and back into Chinese has changed and shifted through time, and how Su Dongpo has been represented in various languages. Determining the distinctive features of the representation of Su Dongpo in this paper is done by means of close reading and comparative analysis. It is a work grounded in the postcolonial translation theory and translator subjectivity theory to explain the cultural mechanisms that shape his image.

2 Su Dongpo's Image in Zhang Zhenyu's Translation

As Meng notes, self-translators pursue not linguistic equivalence but rather "a daring variation on the original text" [4]. This dual impulse shapes both Lin Yutang's construction of Su Dongpo and Zhang Zhenyu's subsequent Chinese reshaping. In order to understand how Su Dongpo deviates in Zhang Zhenyu's Chinese translation, this part will explore the image of Su Dongpo in the original text, setting a reference point.

Drawing from the analysis in chapter three, Lin Yutang presents Su Dongpo as a depoliticized, gifted genius. From the perspective of cultural concepts and narrative standpoints, this chapter introduces postcolonial translation theory and the perspective of translator's subjectivity to examine Zhang Zhenyu's translation practice in the context of interlingual circulation.

2.1 Restoration of Cultural Concepts

Based on postcolonial translation theory points, when a text from a weaker culture is written in a dominant language, it often undergoes a process of domestication. Heterogeneous cultural elements are interpreted, simplified, and adapted to fit the cognitive framework of the target readers in this process.

The Gay Genius is the typical epitome of this process. Lin Yutang depicts Chinese culture in English, providing explanatory interpretations of culture-specific items, to help English readers better understand Chinese culture. However, Chinese culture loses its original sense of strangeness and heterogeneity in the process of interpretation. Therefore, what a translator must accomplish is not merely linguistic conversion, but rather the restoration of cultural identity when translating this book into Chinese.

Source Text: But to this day, "the lion's roar" has become the standard reference to a nagging wife [5].

Target Text: 直到今天, "狮子吼"还是指絮絮不休的妻子 [6].

Zhang Zhenyu's translation shows a subtle stance of restoration. He adopts a literal translation strategy, translating "lion's roar" as "狮子吼", "a nagging wife" as "絮絮不休的妻子". His choice appears faithful on the surface, but it actually retains Lin Yutang's domesticated phrasing without directly tracing back to the original allusion.

Zhang Zhenyu's translation reflects his own subjectivity. He pursues an independent artistic value in the translated text. For him, the combination of "狮子吼" and "絮絮不休的妻子" aligns with his overall stylistic pursuit of a half-classical and half-vernacular text. More importantly, this choice retains the traces of Lin Yutang as a cross-cultural interpreter, allowing readers of Zhang's translation to still sense that they are facing a Su Dongpo who has been mediated through the English world. This act of preservation is precisely Zhang's acknowledgment of Lin's cultural identity and a recognition of the historical reality of translingual writing.

2.2 Adjustment on Narrative Stance

Translator's subjectivity theory emphasizes that the translator makes appropriate selections and takes initiatives in creation during the translation process. In Zhang Zhenyu's Chinese translation of *The Gay Genius*, the narrative stance in the original text is shifted. This adjustment constitutes the core content of his subjective choices.

Source text: It is a pity that such a man should have been treated so [5].

Target text: (omission)

Zhang Zhenyu omits those comments with strong personal emotions in his translations. This is not an isolated case in his translation. Some of Lin Yutang's original comments marked by an explicit first-person intervention are either reduced or weakened in Zhang's translation.

Source text: Wang Anshih was a man of great ability and a visionary, but he was also obstinate, conceited, and intolerant of opposition [5].

Target text: 王安石是个有魄力、有远见的人,但他也固执、自大、不能容物 [6].

Zhang Zhenyu uses words with an ancient Chinese writing style to create distance between the narrator's voice and Su Dongpo. The original phrase "a man of great ability

and a visionary" expresses an objective tone. He translates this sentence as "有魄力、有远见", which lends a more historically grounded quality to the expression. Meanwhile, "obstinate, conceited, and intolerant of opposition" is translated as "固执、自大、不能容物". The use of the four-character phrase makes the judgment more subtle and elegant, and more in line with the style of traditional Chinese historical writing.

From the perspective of postcolonial translation theory, the invisibility strategy adopted by Zhang Zhenyu is a subtle response to discourse power. Lin embeds translation within his creative writing, combining foreignization and domestication strategies. He uses transliteration and literal translation to estrange the language and represent the particularities of Chinese culture, while simultaneously employing idiomatic English expressions and contextual explanations to bridge the distance from his target readers [7]. When Lin Yutang wrote about Chinese culture in English, he appeared as an intervener, which carries a kind of Orientalist power. The Western narrator can interpret the East and can evaluate the East. Zhang Zhenyu weakens the remnants of such discursive power by omitting these interventional comments in his back-translation. He restores the Chinese characters to a state of speaking for themselves, rather than being spoken for by a Western narrator.

From the standpoint of translator's subjectivity, Zhang Zhenyu's selection of translation strategies comes from his comprehension of biography. He believes that the narrator's own voice should not intervene excessively to leave space for historical figures to articulate their own voices. Therefore, his adjustments to Lin Yutang's interventional narration are not a betrayal of the original text, but a negotiation between different generic traditions. He uses the narrative norms of traditional Chinese historical biography to translate Western biography.

In summary, Zhang Zhenyu's translation practice is a cultural negotiation in a post-colonial context. He is reshaping an image of a historical figure domesticated by Lin Yutang. His task is not to restore an authentic Su Dongpo, but to weigh and choose between domestication and restoration, fidelity and creativity. His choices shape an image of Su Dongpo that both continues and deviates from Lin Yutang's original English work. This image is not only the product of Zhang Zhenyu's subjective choices, but also an inevitable outcome of cultural negotiation in cross-lingual writing and back-translation.

3 Discussion

As Wang and Jiang have proposed in their analysis of *Moment in Peking*, Lin Yutang's English composition of Chinese subject matter constitutes foreign language creation, while its Chinese rendition belongs to the category of rootless back-translation [8]. This insight applies equally to *The Gay Genius*. What Zhang Zhenyu back-translates is the image of Su Dongpo that Lin Yutang had already constructed for an English readership. The divergent images of Su Dongpo that emerge from *The Gay Genius* and Zhang Zhenyu's Chinese translation can be further illuminated through the lens of back-translation as cultural restoration. As Yao and Tao observe, translating a Chinese cultural

narrative originally composed in English back into Chinese constitutes a distinct translational phenomenon. Its primary task is "restoring cultural elements to the greatest extent possible, thereby revealing the wisdom and essence of Chinese culture" [7].

3.1 The Reason for the Image Disparity

The Su Dongpo image changes as it is being translated between the English version and the Chinese translation, since Lin Yutang wrote to the Western people and adapted the sage to their desires. The artificial image can only be reconstructed based on the local cultural standards when it returns to China. The variations in the images of Su Dongpo in *The Gay Genius* and its Chinese translation are based on different cultural perspectives and translation approaches. In the process of writing *The Gay Genius*, the target readership of Lin Yutang is English speakers. Lin plays the role of a cross-cultural translator in order to make Su Dongpo, the Eastern sage, comprehensible, enjoyable and familiar to the Western audience. He thus heavily uses the domestication strategy and reduces the ambiguity of the classical allusions to be able to reflect the modern spirit of Su Dongpo. Moreover, Lin presents the concept of Christianity through the framework of Chinese philosophy without weakening its intrinsic spirit [9]. Su Dongpo's sense of humor and spirit of freedom resonate with the Western biographical tradition of embracing genius and individuality. In addition, Lin Yutang's portrayal of Su Dongpo in *The Gay Genius* foregrounds the poetic tension between official duty and reclusive longing. According to Yang, Mount Taibai and Mount Emei "respectively represented service to the government and retreat to private life" [10]. However, the back-translation into Chinese inevitably reframes this image through a different cultural lens and set of translational priorities.

Instead of representing the authentic image of Su Dongpo in historical documents, Zhang Zhenyu chooses to retain part of Lin Yutang's expression in the process of translating the book back to Chinese. He is prone to replace direct English comments with elegant and restrained Chinese words to draw a clear boundary between narrator and Su Dongpo. The systematic filtering of cultural information is evident in Zhang's treatment of culture-specific items. As Li's research shows, the translator has adjusted various material, social, and linguistic details to make them more suitable for the historical and cultural context of the Song Dynasty, rather than pursuing a literal correspondence with Lin Yutang's original English text [11]. In addition, the incommensurability between language and culture further amplifies the shift in image. When Zhang Zhenyu directly reproduces Lin's expressions in his translation without tracing them back to their original Chinese allusions or idiomatic usages, the result is an interruption or dislocation of cultural associations. This image shift is not merely a problem of mistranslating words or phrases. It presents an irreducible structural tension between cross-cultural writing and translation.

3.2 The Substantive Significance of the Image Disparity

The differences between the two Su Dongpo images are not errors to be fixed but the natural outcome of writing for particular readers and translating for another. What the Chinese version offers is not the original historical figure but a portrait that has passed through two distinct cultural filters. In *The Gay Genius*, Su Dongpo is the image of a

Chinese poet that is constructed by people from the English-speaking world. This construction is grounded in history, but its narrative perspective, emotional performance, and cultural background are shaped by the horizon of expectations of the English-speaking readers. When translated into Chinese, Zhang Zhenyu did not attempt to erase traces of Lin Yutang's construction. Chinese readers can recognize the fact that Su Dongpo was recognized by the English-speaking world. Zhang Zhenyu's translation represents an image that has been shifted twice rather than the authentic historical hero.

There are some similarities between *The Gay Genius* and its Chinese translation, such as personality, life experience, and political environment. However, there are significant differences in emotional tone, evaluative criteria, and cultural thickness. In Zhang's translation, Chinese readers can see a Su Dongpo who has been appropriately classicized and elegantized, with a narrative voice that is calm and reserved. In contrast to the passionate, enthusiastic narrator in Lin Yutang's original work, who frequently intervenes in the first person. The significance of this difference lies in the fact that it reveals the inevitable distortion of the image that occurs when a cultural figure travels across language boundaries. It illustrates that back-translation is not a transparent channel of restoration, but rather a new recreation that carries its own position.

4 Conclusion

This study places the problem in the chain of cross-cultural writing and reveals that when a biography returns to the source language culture through translation, the image of the host will undergo a second construction. *The Gay Genius* itself is a selective construction of Su Dongpo, while Zhang Zhenyu's Chinese translation is a reconstruction of this image. This dual reconstruction mechanism shows that in cross-cultural communication in the era of globalization, the image of historical figures is often the product of multiple writings, translations, and consultations.

In today's globalized world, the going out and returning of Chinese culture has become an increasingly important issue. Through the investigation of *The Gay Genius* and its translation, this study reveals a fundamental fact that culture has never simply replicated itself in the cross-language cycle, but experiences the consultation and reshaping of meaning in every writing, translation, and return. The cross-language change of Su Dongpo's image is a vivid witness to this cultural logic.

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