



Prefaces to Translations: A Microhistory of Translation

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Received 9 February 2020; accepted 27 May 2020

Published online 26 June 2020

Abstract

Prefaces, as interface between translator and reader, translation and relevant historical contexts, offer an access to translation activities in history. A survey of prefaces in existing studies suggest that only some canonized pieces have been included into the writing of translation history. Based on the profiles of prefaces to translation, that is, who are the translators, what has been translated, why and how is it translated, it is argued that prefaces are potential in writing a microhistory of translation with marginal, trivial, piecemeal records.

Key words: Prefaces to translations; Translation history; Microhistory; Interpretation

Zhu, L. H. (2020). Prefaces to Translations: A Microhistory of Translation. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 16(2), 17-20. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/11692>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/11692>

INTRODUCTION

Prefaces, is part and parcel of published works. However, “it was not until the publication of Gérard Genette’s book *Seuils* [Thresholds] in 1987 that scholars began to pay sustained attention to them” (Batchelor, 2018, p.2). Likewise, it’s common for translation works to have such a prelude a brief introduction to the original works, translation process, or some relevant comments. Throughout the Chinese translation history, prefaces to translations are in a huge number. Some of them have

been outstanding together with the translations or by themselves due to the deep understanding and independent thoughts within. There exists a paradox. On one hand, prefaces to translations are frequently and highly quoted as first-hand documents in terms of views on translation while on the other hand, fragmented and unsystematic, they as a whole, haven’t drawn enough scholarly attention in the writing of translation history.

As a major part of paratext, prefaces, on the periphery of text together with others like titles, covers, annotations, have long been taken for granted by translation studies. Recent years witness the growing scholarly focus on paratexts all over the world. Batchelor (2018, p.168) claims that researches on paratexts fall into two categories, namely, as ends in themselves “that are associated with translated texts” or “as documents or artefacts that are of interest because of what they tell us about something else”. In effect, prefaces to translations is “always bearer of an authorial commentary either more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes, between the text and what lies outside it” (Genette, 1991, p.261). As an interface between translator and reader, translation and relevant historical contexts, they are likely to offer an access to the actual translation activities in the history about who are the translators, what has been translated, why and how they are translated. Given the abundance and significance of prefaces to translations, it’s of vital importance to clarify its part in translation history. Based on cases in a Chinese historical setting and a survey of previous writing of translation history, this paper is a probe into the unique role of prefaces.

1. PREFACES IN EXISTING STUDIES

Prefaces to translations are carrier of thoughts on translation, particularly in traditional China and have been used as basics in writing translation history. Evidence can be found in *A History of China’s Translation Theory*

(Zhongguo Yixue Lilun Shigao 中国译学理论史稿) in China written by Chen Fukang with references in its appendix which mostly are prefaces in ancient China. Another example is *Essays on Translation* (Fanyi Lunji 翻译论集) collected by Luo Xinzhang. It can be found that lot of pieces on translation involved are prefaces to translations, for example, the prefaces to translations of Buddhist Scripture. However, the situations of prefaces in the writing of translation history can be summarized as follows.

First of all, prefaces by notable translators are listed. The typical way is to select and enumerate some statements and comments about translation in the prefaces in a synchronic order. For example, extracts from prefaces by Dao An (道安), Zhi Mindu (支敏度), Seng Rui (僧叡) and the like are introduced to illustrate the translation activities and thoughts of Buddhist Scripture. For one thing, the general focus is on the prefaces by those outstanding translators with great achievements and impacts while most other pieces have been ignored in the traditional writing. For another, the thoughts in prefaces by a single translator may vary from time to time, which can hardly be summarized in several single words. It's noteworthy that the linear presentation is likely to efface the complexity of historical narratives. For example, Dao An, as the greatest master of Buddhist Scripture at the time, have inconsistent views on translation in prefaces. He insists that the source text should be followed closely but he also advocates that the redundancy in the source needs to be omitted for brevity. In short, connections among those thoughts in prefaces require further exploration.

Moreover, some other prefaces, considered as of minor importance, are not equally valued on the list of historical writing. As a matter of fact, nearly all translation works have prefaces and thus the existing prefaces must be in huge quantities. In this way, the prefaces collected and highlighted merely account for a quite small percentage. Some may be "invaluable" and in turn out of recorded history while some others may be "hidden", "manipulated" or "drown" on purpose. (Liang, 2006, pp.39-40) Since history is narrated, it's certain for the prefaces as well to be treated in a totally different way. It's proved that most writings of translation history choose to center upon great events, outstanding translators, or widely-known translations, namely "grand history" with heroes. Just as the author of *The Translation History of China in the 20th Century* (二十世纪中国翻译史) puts it, "Lu Xun, Guo Moruo and Mao Dun have made great achievement and stood out not only in writing but in translating as well, so they are put at the core in the compilation" (Fang, 2005: 1) Similarly, *A History of China's Translation Theory* "aims to cover those representative, influential or meaningful comments and outlines the developments of China's translation history" (Mu, 2000, p.46). Therefore, such keywords as "influential" and "outstanding" indicate partly the common standard of historical narrative. It's

almost the same case with collections of prefaces since collection itself is a kind of narratives.

What's worse, in addition to the canonized prefaces, the thoughts on translation in prefaces have usually been further extracted and condensed in several words such as "案本" (follow the source text closely), "信、达、雅" (Faithfulness, smoothness and elegance), "神似" (resemblance in spirit) and "化境" (transfiguration), which are fully familiar to most scholars. As a result, they are regarded as signs of translation thoughts of a certain translator regardless of linguistic, social and historical context and in such repeated narratives of historical writing, interpretations may be far from the original intention or meaning. Prefaces, with its advantage on the periphery of certain texts in specific historical background with translators' records may be an approach to the ins and outs of what's going on. Therefore, a close reading of prefaces to translations instead of repetition of those key words is the supposed way prefaces take part in the writing of translation history.

In fact, prefaces to translations contains much more than what have often been quoted. It concerns specific translation purposes and strategies, interpretations of the source text by translators, the contexts ranging from literary, political, social and historical. Arguably, it's a mirror of narrated history with multiplicity and richness, which can never give way to those canonized keywords.

2. PROFILES IN PREFACES TO TRANSLATIONS

As first-hand record of translation activities, prefaces to translations contribute to the grand history as well micro history with its unique and specific way of writing. Prefaces to translations is offer of information in a wide range including the source text, the author, the translator and the target readers. In another word, a close reading of prefaces is conducive to a better understanding of who are the translators, what has been translated, why and how it translated as is mentioned above.

Authors of the prefaces are something intriguing. Translators, in common cases, are the very author of prefaces where their own experience, aesthetics, literary preferences and most importantly their personal interpretation of the source text are presented. Prefaces in this sense, is an interpretation both of the source text and of the translator. For example, such masters in Buddhist Scripture as Dao An, Xuan Zang, Yi Jing explicate their views in prefaces without exception. In the same way, most translators make full use of prefaces to translations a platform to voice their views. It's worth noting that besides the translators, those in high political or literary status such as were asked to write prefaces as well. One example is the emperors who offered prefaces to the translations of Scripture and another typical example is

Wu Rulun who wrote a preface to Yan Fu's translation of *Evolution* (天演论) in which he spoke highly of Yan Fu and his works. It's beyond doubt that support from governors or professionals is kind of promotion for the translation and the translator. They are the "patronage" (Levefere, 2004, pp.14-15) of translation activities.

What has been translated in the prefaces is usually a brief introduction to the source text ranging from its origin, version and reception in the source language. At the same time, the theme, plot and characters are outlined. These together help the readers have a pre-understanding of the text which guide them into the presupposed interpretation which can be intentionally or unintentionally. For one thing, the prefaces impose an impact due to translators' experience, aesthetics, or even stances and for another, prefaces tend to be used as a way to interpret the source text with intended purpose. Particularly at historical turning point, foreign texts have been borrowed to realize the social revolution, which has been clarified in the prefaces. For example, in the final years of China's Qing dynasty, Yan Fu, Lin Shu, Liang Qichao and others took full advantage of the prefaces to express their personal views and the readers in turn followed the line of their interpretation. Therefore, as every coin has two sides, since any text is open, prefaces are beneficial to direct the reading, while simultaneously hinder readers from other possible interpretations.

Prefaces also provide a record of why and how is a certain work translated. In China's translation history, most primary sources of thoughts on translation derive there. Prefaces of translations of Buddhist Scripture is a good example, which serve as major clues in clarifying some specific translation problems including subjects, methods of translation and forms of translated texts as most of ancient translation theories derived from prefaces of Chinese-translated Buddhist Scripture. First, the records in prefaces reveals the way of translating, namely pair work between interpreter and translator in early stages and translation assembly which engaged first in expounding and then translating. Secondly, those common disputes on translation methods including "follow the original" vs. "lose the original", "wen" vs. "zhi" and "name" vs. "nature" can also be traced back to the original prefaces together with a larger historical background. Thus, prefaces as a carrier of translation purpose, selection of texts and the detailed process, can be a significant access to study of certain translators and translation criticism. Within a social context and a close reading of prefaces, the traditional translation problems are explored.

Even in late Qing dynasty when adaptation was rather popular, the translators also clarified their thoughts on translation in prefaces. Extremely different from those of Buddhist Scriptures in both contents and modes, prefaces in this period with special themes and models, are rarely concerned about translation methods while

characterized with the social function of translation works. The overall themes embrace improvement of status of novels, appeal to save the nation and comparison between Chinese and foreign literatures. Accordingly, by means of specific narrative modes of prefaces including narrative stratification, intrusion and voice, prefaces reveal the way how different kinds of original texts have been manipulated subject to the mere motivation of enlightening the mass, that is, how an individual narrative finally collides with the collective narrative at that historical time. Since prefaces cover explanation of why a text is singled out, how it is translated and to whom it is targeted, a better understanding of translation norms can be attained.

It is the rich and multiple profiles in prefaces mentioned above that attract increasingly wide attention from scholars. Nevertheless, more emphasis has been put on prefaces of those great translators as "threshold" to certain translated text. There's something more than that. Prefaces are closely related to translation text as well as its social, cultural and historical context. In other words, prefaces should be studied in a web with other prefaces instead of as an isolated one.

3. PREFACES IN WRITING OF MICROHISTORY

Previous studies concerning prefaces often take "translation products as its point of focus" (Batchelor, 2018, p.168), thus "threshold" to the translation. As translation studies widen its scope from mere linguistic to cultural concerns, paratext, prefaces in particular turn to be a bridge between text and social context. Alternatively, they themselves are unique narratives of translators in historical periods. The profiles within that prefaces as a whole can add much more for translation studies. New historians pay more attention to heterogeneity and multiplicity and accordingly to those marginal pieces which are considered of minor (or no) significance. Histories are written in this way to dethrone the traditionally authoritative grand history. Prefaces, approximately neutral in historical writing, which have been partly valued and partly ignored, can take part in historical writing in a relatively objective and complete way.

To start with, the difference between the center and the marginal needs to be removed. It must be admitted that difference exists unavoidably in historical writing. Some prefaces have been repeatedly narrated and then canonized while some others have been left aside and hardly mentioned. However, as the standing points change, time and space shifts, the center and the marginal may alternate as well. Take prefaces to *Collection of Foreign Short Stories* (域外小说集) by Lu Xun for example. At the beginning of its publication, it did not catch wide

public attention and in turn was in a marginal position. Nevertheless, decades later when Lu Xun, the author, was politically elevated and widely recognized, the collection which was once poorly sold and the preface to it as well turned out to be important archives of his thoughts on translation. It's evident that the changing points have a great impact on the reception of a translated text as well as on the role of prefaces, which may experience a flow from the marginal to the center, or vice versa.

The prefaces on the marginal also play an important role in supporting and supplementing the discourse in the center. As Liang Qichao puts it, a single document or archive is often of little significance, the value of which, in national or historical particularities, can only be realized in a cluster of documents with others. (Liang, 2006: 62) For this reason, the prefaces on the marginal and those in the center are in a flow as well as in a complementary relationship.

Meanwhile, whether a preface is valued or not depends not merely on its own significance, but also on the significance endowed by the source text or the author. The central role of prefaces in the writing history is determined by a wide range of parameters from the source text, translator, and patronage to ideology and poetics. Based on a close reading of prefaces to translations of Buddhist scripture, it is found that such masters as Seng Zhao, Seng Rui, Hui Guan and Dao Xuan, despite their large number of elegant comments on translation, are of much less concern than Dao An and Xuan Zang. The reason behind is that preface itself has already been deeply influenced by translators of Buddhist Scripture. To be more specific, it is their role in Buddhist Scripture instead of their thoughts on translation that put them in the center of existing translation history. In other words, the standard of being sifted, selected and passed down is the role in Buddhist Scripture rather than in translation history. Undeniably, although translation is socially, culturally and even politically contextualized, translation history needs a standard different (at least to some extent). It can be assumed that some prefaces on the marginal in the writing of a grand history are likely to be at the center so far as thoughts on translation are concerned.

Instead of linear, uni-fold writing, New historians tend to trace the episodes, accidents and even trifles. In this sense, prefaces, piecemeal and unsystematic, become challenging as well supplemental to the grand history. On one hand, as the mirror of historical setting and at the same time the extension of translations, prefaces offer an approach to "what a certain event meant in its historical background and what it means to us at present" (Zhang, 1993, p.7). On the other hand, prefaces have either ideas which echo the central discourse or ideas

that have been stifled. In conclusion, in the light of New historicism, these marginal voices add to the "polyphony" of narratives, and at the same time play a unique role in historical writing.

CONCLUSION

Empirically composed of "an assorted set of practices and discourse of all sorts and of all ages" (Genette, 1991, p.262), prefaces is not merely "threshold" to a certain translated text, but also to a better understanding of translation activities throughout the history. With a contrast and a comparison between scattered and systematic commentaries, historical records and facts, the narratives in prefaces can be considered as the major documents in writing translation histories. Different from previous writing of a grand translation history, which are mainly chronicles threaded with great events, important translators or famous literary works, prefaces are potential in writing translation histories with multifold perspectives and narratives. The former is a History which seems to be objective but in fact has a relatively fixed center while the latter offers a great many possibilities. The translation histories based on those marginal, ignored prefaces are peripheral but have their own center and seemingly monotonous but are polyphonic together. Prefaces, narratives themselves, become part of the historical narratives. In this sense, translation histories are not supposed to be set in one way, but in many ways.

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