

Variational Translation Phenomenon of *Six Chapters of A Floating Life*

-- Taking Lin Yutang's English Version as an Example

Shuang Zhu

Department of Foreign Languages & Translation, Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu Sichuan, 610000, China

Abstract: The Variational Translation theory was summarized and proposed by Huang Zhonglian, a Chinese translator and scholar, from his many years of translation practice and research. There are altogether seven flexible means: omission, editing, narration, condensation, combination, modification and addition. *Six Chapters of A Floating Life* by Shen Fu of the Qing Dynasty was beautifully written and deeply loved by Lin Yutang. To better promote Chinese culture to the world, Lin translated this novel, and its English version was highly praised abroad. Based on the Variational Translation theory and combined with examples, this paper discusses in detail the specific manifestations of the translation variation strategies such as omission, editing, narration, modification and addition in the English version of *Six Chapters of A Floating Life*. The ultimate goal is to enhance the guiding role of the Variational Translation theory in the English translation of Chinese novels.

Keywords: *Six Chapters of A Floating Life*; Variational Translation Phenomenon; Variational Translation Theory.

1. Introduction

Among a host of classical Chinese novels in China, Shen Fu's *Six Chapters of A Floating Life* deeply moved Lin Yutang with its extremely beautiful language, sincere and touching emotions, and poignant and moving story. Lin Yutang once said, "I have always loved *Six Chapters of A Floating Life* and vowed to translate it into English so that the world could have a glimpse of the peaceful and lovely life of a Chinese couple. It was successively translated in the spring and summer of 1935 and published in the August issue of *T'ien Hsia Monthly* and *West Wind Monthly*. Quite a number of British readers lingered over it and reluctant to finish reading. This shows how deeply this book touched people." Broadly speaking, Lin Yutang was a successful cross-cultural communicator mainly through translation, and the English version of *Six Chapters of A Floating Life*, was his most renowned translation work. Under the guidance of the Variational Translation theory, this paper intends to explore the English version of *Six Chapters of A Floating Life*, conduct an in-depth study of the reasons why this English version was popular among Western readers abroad, and what translation strategies the translator adopted to translate this classical Chinese novel into English, thus enabling foreign readers to appreciate the beauty of Chinese novels and the profound Chinese culture.

2. Overview of the Translation Variation Theory

The Variational Translation theory was formulated by Huang Zhonglian through years of translation practice and research, standing in contrast to Complete Translation. In 2000, his book *Translate Variant Studies* laid the theoretical foundation for this theory. Two years later, his book *Variational Translation Theory* was published, marking a shift from China's reliance on Western translation theories. The variational translation theory primarily refers to a translation approach that involves integrating and adapting the content of the source language to a certain extent through

various flexible means such as addition, omission, editing, narration, merging, and modification before translating it into the target language. Under the guidance of this theory, translators often adopt diverse variational translation methods tailored to the specific needs of the target audience, including excerpt translation, compilation, condensation, summary, translation with commentary, adaptation, interpretation, and translation with elaboration. This theory aims to effectively convey the original work's information by adapting the content, form, theme, or narrative style of the source language, making it suitable for translating texts of various genres. This article will delve into the application of the Variational Translation theory in Lin Yutang's English translation of *Six Chapters of A Floating Life*.

3. The Variational Translation Phenomenon in the English Translation of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*

During Lin Yutang's time, most Westerners knew little about China and even held distorted prejudices against the Chinese nation, considering China to be an inferior race. In an effort to rectify these misconceptions among Westerners, Lin Yutang embarked on a mission to translate Chinese works and introduce Chinese culture to the West, offering them a glimpse into the authentic China. Lin aspired for his translations to facilitate Westerners' understanding and appreciation of genuine Chinese culture.

According to the definition outlined in Huang Zhonglian's articles, Lin Yutang's translation activities, which "involved capturing relevant content from the original work through flexible means such as addition, omission, editing, narration, condensation, merging, and modification based on the specific requirements of particular readers under certain conditions," constitute a special form of cultural translation known as variational translation. In his English translation of *Six Chapters of A Floating Life*, the translator employed various flexible techniques such as addition, omission, editing,

narration, and modification to faithfully reproduce the content of the original work while making the plot more concise and elevating the linguistic quality of the translation beyond that of the original. The following section will delve into these flexible techniques through specific examples.

3.1. Editing

Example1: At this time, there were a group of friends, like Yang Pufan, also called Chang Xu, who specialized in portrait sketches. Yuan Shaoyu, also called Pai, who specialized in painting landscape. And Wang Xinglan, also called Yan, good at painting flowers and birds. They all liked the Hsiaoshuanglou because of its seclusion, so they would bring their painting utensils to the place.

Example2: Among the friends at Hsiaoshuanglou, four things were tabooed: firstly, talking about people's official promotions; secondly, gossiping about law-suits and current affairs; thirdly, discussing the conventional eight-legged essays for the imperial examinations; and fourthly, playing cards and dice.

Editing refers to a flexible translation technique that involves reorganizing the content of the original text through compilation, arrangement, and rewriting before translating the consolidated content into the target language, making the translated content more structured and orderly. For instance, arrangement involves reordering the content of the original work according to the narrative style of the target language, while compilation or rewriting primarily involves selecting part or all of the content after reorganizing the original content and then translating it. In translating the original text, Lin Yutang adopted the method of compilation and editing to make the content more structured and orderly, striving for perfection. In Example 1, the translator added a transitional sentence at the beginning of the paragraph to introduce the subsequent descriptions of three characters, making the translated text very smooth and enhancing the reading experience for readers. In Example 2, the translator used ordinal numbers, which are most commonly used in English, to conform to the structural conventions of English and allow readers to grasp the overall structure and main idea of the paragraph at a glance. This makes it easier for Westerners to understand, increasing the readability of the translation.

3.2. Addition

Example 1: I noticed that the embroidery on her shoes was very fine, and learned that it was her own work, so that I began to realize that she was gifted at other things, too, besides reading and writing.

Example 2: Take good care of yourself, for there will be no one to look after you.

Example 3: It was a picture of the Old Man holding, in one hand, a red silk thread for the purpose of binding together the hearts of all couples.

Addition refers to increasing the information content based on the original work, primarily through three methods: explanation, commentary, and writing. It is not difficult to observe that in order to better conform to the writing norms of the target language and the reading habits of English readers, Lin frequently employs the addition translation method, including adding subjects, predicates, prepositions, prepositional phrases, conjunctions, and so forth. In Example 3, Lin Yutang added a footnote to explain 'Red Silk', which enables English readers to better understand the translation and the original text, and is also more easily accepted by

Westerners, enhancing the reading experience for English readers.

3.3. Omission

Example 1: Each vase should have flowers of only one colour. The mouth of the vase should be broad so that the flowers could lie easily together.

Example 2: Whenever we met each other in the house whether it be in a dark room or in a narrow corridor we used to hold each other's hands and ask "Where are you going?"

Omission refers to the process of removing information from the original work that the translator believes is not necessary for the reader. The purpose of omission is to achieve a greater understanding from less, fully showcasing the value of useful information. There are various reasons for omission, such as the original work having an unreasonable structure, redundant content that lacks conciseness and organization, or the need to eliminate unnecessary secondary information to simplify the translation and better meet the needs of the target readers. In Example 1, the translator omitted parts of the original text and translated it as "only one colour" and "be broad," making it clear and concise, so that readers can immediately grasp the intended meaning, in line with the aesthetic of simplicity in English. In Example 2, the translator combined two different words in the sentence into a single phrase "met each other", because these two words convey the same meaning in Chinese, so the translator chose to use only one, making the translation natural and fluent for readers.

3.4. Modification

Example 1: Yun would take off her hairpin and sell it for wine without a second thought.

Example 2: And while at first we managed to make both ends meet, gradually our purse became thinner and thinner.

Example 3: On the twenty-second of the first moon in 1780, ...

Modification is the act of changing, involving alterations, adaptations, and reconstructions of the content or form of the original text, resulting in a noticeable transformation of the original work. For example, in Example 1, the translator seamlessly integrated the four-character idiom into the preceding sentence, using the preposition "without" to connect the two parts and form an absolute construction. This alteration of the original form and structure aligns with English writing conventions. In Example 2, the translator transformed the four-character idioms into appropriate corresponding expressions in the target language. Although the form and structure of the original text were changed, the translation effect matches the content, style, and even the rhythm of the original, underscoring the translator's solid bilingual proficiency. In Example 3, since English readers may not be familiar with the significance of "Qianlong Gengzi" (a specific year in the Chinese lunar calendar), the translator replaced it with the Gregorian calendar year commonly known in the West, making it immediately understandable. This modification renders the translation more acceptable to Western audiences.

3.5. Modification

Example 1: On the seventh night of the seventh moon of that year, Yun prepared incense candles and some melons and other fruits, so that we might together worship the Grandson of Heaven in the Hall called "After My Heart." I had carved

two seals with the inscription “That we might remain husband and wife from incarnation to incarnation,” I kept the seal with positive characters, while she kept the one with negative characters to be used in our correspondence.

Example 2: My friend then dragged me to Leng Xiang’s place. I saw that Leng Xiang was already in her middle-age, but she had a girl by the name of Han Yuan, who was a very sweet young maiden, still in her teens. Her eyes looked “like an autumn lake that cooled one by its cold splendour.

Narration refers to the act of writing down or articulating the content of the original text in the target language, including paraphrasing or directed restatement. When handling Example 1 and Example 2, the translator paraphrased the content of the original text in the target language and made appropriate adjustments in linguistic forms. This not only helps to highlight the rationality and normative nature of the language in the translation but also facilitates readers’ recognition and acceptance of the source language culture.

4. Conclusion

Based on Huang Zhonglian’s Variational Translation theory, this paper briefly analyzes the variational translation phenomenon in Lin Yutang’s English translation of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*. Representative translation examples from this English version are selected to analyze the

specific variation translation strategies employed and the resulting translation effects. As a renowned translator, Lin Yutang still successfully handles various cultural information in the original text, demonstrating his profound bilingual proficiency. His ingenious application of variational translation methods in the translation provides us with valuable insights worth learning and emulating. There is no doubt that with the gradual strengthening of cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries and the deepening understanding of Chinese culture among English-speaking peoples, the work of Chinese-to-English translation will further bridge China with the world and facilitate mutual understanding.

References

- [1] Huang Zhonglian. Variational Translation Theory. China Translation Corporation, 2000, p. 77-85.
- [2] Huang Zhonglian. Variational Translation Theory: A Brand-new Translation Theory. Foreign Language Teaching Abroad, 2002, p. 19-22.
- [3] Liu Ying. On “Variational Translation” in Translation. Tsinghua Journal of Philosophy and Social Sciences, 2019, p. 92.
- [4] Shen Fu. Six Chapters of a Floating Life. Translated by Lin Yutang. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1999, p. 51-55+72.