

YANFU TRANSLATION PRINCIPLES: 信, 达, 雅

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Annotation

In the process of translation, the views expressed and the theories developed, as well as the proper application of the Xin (faithfulness), Da (expressiveness), and Ya (elegance) principles, emphasize that translation is not merely the act of transferring words from one language to another, but rather a process of cultural and national exchange. It is understood as an art that requires mastery, where the translator must possess a profound knowledge not only of both languages but also of the cultures they represent — a delicate and intricate matter indeed.

Key words

Yan Fu, Tianyanlun, Huxley, Yu Qian, Tytler, Zheng, Tickell, Byron, Homer, Xin, Da, Ya, Yip, Kumaraiva, Bian Zhilin, Hermeneutic, Ye Weilian, I Cheng, Jin Zhi yu yue.

Evolution of Chinese Translation Theory: From Yan Fu to the Late 20th Century

Yan Fu's preface to his translation of *Tianyanlun* (Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*) appeared at an exceptionally opportune moment to inaugurate 20th-century Chinese translation theory—it was published in 1901. Frequently recognized as the most significant theoretical work on translation in China, this brief text has been repeatedly debated by scholars over the past century, attaining a level of importance unmatched by any other theoretical work produced in the country. There are diverse opinions regarding Yan Fu's contribution to Chinese translation theory. His ideas on 信 (xìn - faithfulness/trustworthiness), 达 (dá - fluency/intelligibility), and 雅 (yǎ - elegance/refinement) are evaluated as having exerted both positive and negative influences.

From a critical perspective, some scholars point out that Yan Fu's practical translations—specifically his rendition of Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*—dive significantly from his theoretical views. He approached Huxley's text with immense liberty, demonstrating a lack of strict adherence to the principle of *xìn* (faithfulness). Some scholars argue that Yan Fu's theory is not inherently Chinese, suggesting he read and fully adapted Alexander Tytler's *Essay on the Principles of Translation*. Conversely, others maintain that his ideas are distinctly Chinese, originating from the thoughts of the 3rd-century Buddhist monk and translator Zhi Qian.

The second work in this section is Zheng Zhenduo's article, "How to Translate Literary Texts" (1921). This article aims to introduce Tytler's "principles of translation" to Chinese readers. According to Zheng, Tytler's three principles are:

1. **Fully conveying the content of the source text**, though the translator may cautiously add or abridge where necessary (citing examples from the works of Tickell, Byron, and Homer);
2. **Conveying the style and tone of the source text** (citing examples from the Bible, Homer, and the poem "William and Margaret");
3. **Conveying the fluency of the source text**—this is generally easier in lyrical poetry due to greater freedom, but more difficult in texts characterized by idioms, unique syntactic structures, or profound simplicity.

Bian Zhilin, the most famous 20th-century Chinese poet, expressed his dissatisfaction with Yan Fu's views in his 1983 article, "Literary Translation and Linguistic Sensitivity." Through several examples, Bian demonstrates that Yan Fu's ideas were insufficient. Instead of the "triple principle" (*xin, da, ya*), Bian proposes three directions in translation:

- **Faithfulness**,
- **Similarity**,
- **Translation**—referring here to an "independent approach specific to translation, distinct from the original creative writing process."

A fourth perspective is provided by Ye Weilian (Wai-lim Yip) in his 1994 work, "Refuting the Claims of *Xīn, Dá*, and *Yǎ*." This article reflects the influence of late 20th-century deconstructionist ideas on Chinese translation theory. Yip critiques the concept of "faithfulness" and argues that absolute objectivity in human thought is no longer possible for the following reasons:

1. One cannot assume a "common structure" constituting a universal spiritual or linguistic foundation among humanity;
2. The existence of intertextual resonance (interconnectivity with other texts) in every text makes it impossible to determine the author's original intent;
3. A historical distance exists between the author and the reader that can never be fully bridged.

Furthermore, Yip believes that Yan Fu's other two principles—"fluency" (*dá*) and "elegance" (*yǎ*)—are incorrectly grounded. Citing poems by Andrew Marvell and William Wordsworth, he demonstrates the near impossibility of recreating a writer's expressive power in another language. Consequently, he poses the question: "If it is impossible to restore the vitality and tone of the original expression, what place do 'fluency' and 'elegance' hold in translation?" While faithfulness itself is difficult to achieve, a translation that is faithful but unintelligible is not a translation at all. Therefore, intelligibility is paramount.

Since China opened to the world through maritime trade, there has been no shortage of translators and interpreters. However, if tasked with translating a book that meets both requirements (faithfulness and intelligibility), very few can succeed. The reasons for this are shallowness, one-sidedness, and an inability to distinguish nuances. As Kumarajiva (*Gù yǐjā Jiùmólúóshí*) said: "Whoever imitates me, falls." I sincerely hope that the many translators who follow me do not use this book as an excuse for their errors.

Terms in Western languages are usually explained as they appear in the text, resembling the Chinese style of digression. In Western texts, subsequent sentences expand upon and complete the preceding thoughts. A sentence may consist of two or three words, or sometimes hundreds. If we replicate this grammatical structure exactly in translation, the text becomes unintelligible; if we shorten or omit it, certain thoughts expressed by the author are lost. Therefore, a translator must study the text deeply, comprehend it fully, and then re-express it in the best possible form. Because the original thought is profound and the style complex, conveying both simultaneously is difficult. The translator must bridge the preceding and following parts of the text to reveal the subject. All these efforts are directed toward **intelligibility**, for only an intelligible translation can be a faithful one. The *I Ching* (*Book of Changes*) states: "Faithfulness is the basis of writing." Confucius said: "Writing must be intelligible," and "If there is no refinement in language, its influence will not go far." These three maxims define the correct path for literature and serve as a guide for translation.

Beyond faithfulness and intelligibility, one should also strive for **elegance** (*yǎ*) in translation. This is important not only to expand the text's reach but also to express complex ideas in an

understandable form. Writing in the pre-Han Dynasty style helps in understanding profound meanings, whereas this often becomes difficult in modern plain language. In recent years, new theories and terms have emerged rapidly, and finding equivalent Chinese words for them is challenging. While some Chinese phrases are close to the original meaning, they are not fully equivalent. In such cases, the translator must exercise judgment and create new terms based on the meaning.

According to Tytler, a good translation should fully transfer all the merits of the original work so that a reader in the target language feels the same impact as a reader of the original language. He establishes three eternal rules:

1. **Full conveyance of ideas** – all thoughts from the source text must be fully expressed in the translation.
2. **Preservation of style** – the style and tone of writing must be of the same character as the original.
3. **Naturalness** – when read, the translation should not feel like a translation but as natural as an original work.

Tytler explices that a translator must be able to grasp the full meaning of the words in the source text and possess a profound understanding of the subject matter. If a translator lacks proficiency in either the language or the theme, they cannot fully comprehend the author's intent, inevitably leading to a loss of meaning. To illustrate this, Tytler cites the error of M. Folard, a military expert who attempted to explain ancient Greek and Roman military tactics. Lacking a deep command of the Greek language, Folard relied on another translator's work. Consequently, the translation was riddled with serious errors: battle descriptions were distorted, and the significance of military formations was misrepresented. This example underscores that a translator must possess a perfect command of both language and content. Tytler further warns that even for those skilled in these areas, the nuances of language—such as idioms, tone, syntax, and subtext—cannot be acquired solely through dictionaries and grammar books. These can only be "felt" through extensive and attentive reading. Thus, the art of translation is not merely a matter of linguistic knowledge but a process requiring cultural sensitivity and artistic intuition.

Bian Zhilin (1983): On Linguistic Sensitivity

Beginning in 1940, Bian Zhilin taught courses on literary translation, where he presented his students with a fresh perspective on Yan Fu's principles of “信、达、雅” (**faithfulness, intelligibility, elegance**). He argued: "If the source text is intelligible and beautiful, the translation must reflect these exact qualities. Otherwise, it loses its faithfulness." As an example, he mentions Tsubouchi Shoyo's translation of Shakespeare, noting that Shoyo failed to preserve the original's blank verse, thereby distancing the translation from the original's form. Bian remarks: "In Japan, Shoyo's translations were considered even better than Shakespeare's originals." However, he maintains a critical stance: if a translation departs from the original form (e.g., blank verse), it may be a "creative adaptation," but it is not a "translation" because "faithfulness to form" was not maintained. It may be aesthetically superior, yet as a translation, it remains unfaithful.

Ye Weilian (Wai-lim Yip, 1994): A Critical Deconstruction

From this point, a critical analysis of Yan Fu's principles—*xin, da, ya*—begins. Ye Weilian opens his text with a quote from Walter Benjamin's famous essay, "*The Task of a Translator*": "No translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original... For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change." In essence, translation is not a mere transfer but a rebirth. Ye Weilian asserts: "Experienced translators know that there is no such thing as a 'complete translation'!" This reflects the famous Italian aphorism: *Traduttore,*

traditore— “The translator is a traitor.” Any translation loses absolute faithfulness to the original and can only strive for approximation. He cites various authors:

- **Ezra Pound:** "If a translation is 90% correct, it is a divine miracle."
- **Fitzgerald:** "A live sparrow is better than a stuffed eagle" (implying that naturalness is superior to false faithfulness).
- **Croce:** "Unfaithful beauty is preferable to faithful ugliness."
- **Goethe:** "There are two maxims in translation: one requires that the author of a foreign nation be brought across to us in such a manner that we can look on him as our own; the other requires that we should go across to what is foreign and adapt ourselves to its conditions." Both paths compromise absolute faithfulness, as the translator is caught between two worlds.

Ye Weilian critiques the "Xin, Da, Ya" principles as follows:

- **信 (Xin - Faithfulness):** Total faithfulness is impossible; translation always involves transformation.
- **达 (Da - Intelligibility/Fluency):** This is relative; it depends on time, style, and culture.
- **雅 (Ya - Elegance):** This is not a "permanent" criterion; it changes with every era.

He concludes: "We can only speak of faithfulness or accuracy in practical fields (for 'transmitting messages'). In literary translation, these concepts are relative and bound to cultural contexts." This raises fundamental questions: What does "being faithful to the original" mean? Is it faithfulness to the content? To the structure and rhythmic form of a poem? To wordplay (such as E.E. Cummings' "*manunkind*" or Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*)? To the tone and emotion? Or to the "meaning beyond the words"—the overall resonance of the work? Consequently, a translator always sacrifices certain aspects because the differences between two languages prevent the simultaneous preservation of everything.

The text invokes aesthetic concepts from Chinese literature: “**meaning beyond words**” (言外之意), "depth beyond tone and rhythm," and "the lingering vibration of meanings." It is classified that the meaning of a poem is never fully expressed; it is "felt" but "unspoken." Translation is not merely a linguistic substitution but a hermeneutic (interpretive) process. A translator desires to be faithful to every layer of the poem—content, form, tone, aesthetic feeling, and philosophical spirit—but must always find a balance. Reading a work is an experience tied to language, history, and personal lived experience.

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