

Variational Translation of the Titles of Rulers in Ba and Shu: An English Translation Study on the Bestowed Realm

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Abstract: Based on the Pre-Qin Enfeoffment System, Zhou Kinship System, and the Five Ranks of Nobility, this paper conducted literature studies to select 43 titles of rulers in *The Bestowed Realm*. Conceptual analyses and comparative analyses were utilized on grounds of the interpretation of ancient Chinese text. In doing so, three distinct characteristics of the original text were identified, i.e. demotic expression, contradictory reference, and cultural parataxis. To this end, this paper, with a special focus on the variant of translation, hopes to provide new insights and references for translation studies of historical terminology. Variational translation theory (VTT) was applied in the English translation of the titles of rulers in the Ba-Shu political system. The results indicate that centering on VTT-moderated alteration, addition, and deletion may help approach semantic equivalence while ensuring readability, clear referentiality, and cultural relevance, thereby delineating the political and cultural nuances of Ba-Shu.

1. Introduction

The Ba-Shu region, represented by Sanxingdui, is one important cradle of Chinese civilization and the ancient cultural center in the upper reaches of the Yangtze River^[1]. Academic activities in this field have been thriving for 90 years since the 1930s, but the enthusiasm remains unabated. As solid evidence of the diversity and unity of Chinese civilization, the global significance of the ‘Sanxingdui Culture’ awaits further exploration^[2]. The international promotion of Ba-Shu archaeology literature helps illustrate the continuous cultural and historical stories of the oriental giant, highlighting the Chinese stance, wisdom, and values within the discursal framework that emphasizes equality, mutuality, dialogue, and inclusiveness. *The Bestowed Realm: The Mystery of the Discovery of Sanxingdui and Jinsha Sites*^[3], hereinafter referred to as *The Bestowed Realm*, is a masterpiece of documentary literature by Yue Nan, representing an indispensable contribution to the archaeological community while boasting significant communication value. Translation serves as a bridge for communication, whereas the various terms in the book, especially ruler titles

covering multidisciplinary knowledge in archaeology, history, political science, etc., pose a great translation challenge. This paper attempts to explore the VTT-based adaptation techniques that are faithful to the original text while aesthetically pleasing. The translation of ruler titles has been prioritized to provide a new perspective for the English translation of historical terminology and promote the internationalization of Ba-Shu culture.

2. Titles of Ba-Shu Rulers

In ancient Ba and Shu, the titles of rulers comprise a wealth of information regarding respect, responsibilities, and ranks. These titles reflect the political system and political features of these age-old realms. On grounds of the Pre-Qin Enfeoffment System^[4], the Zhou Kinship System^[5], and the Five Ranks of Nobility^[6], a detailed conceptual analysis has been conducted. In total, 43 titles are selected. The exact scale of Ba and Shu remains debatable, thus the translation of relative titles requires deliberation. In this paper, the interpretations of these titles are derived from *Records of the Grand Historian*^[7], *Gudai Hanyu: Ancient Chinese Language*^[8], and *XIANDAI HANYU CIDIAN: Modern Chinese Dictionary*^[9].

3. Three Categories of Selected Titles

Linguistic phenomena, the components of language and the interrelations of these components, exist objectively; linguistic facts are any language phenomenon that exists as an object of linguistic description^[10]. Given differences in backgrounds and theoretical intervention, the same linguistic phenomenon may capture varying views. Xing Fuyi^[11] put forward three requirements for language facts, i.e. sufficient observation, rich description, and adequate explanation. Building on this, conceptual analyses and comparative analyses have identified three textual characteristics of the ruler titles in the original text.

3.1 Demotic Expression

The deeds of the rulers of Shu abound in the source text, representing a strong sense of narration. In addition to the commonly-adopted titles containing the morphemes “Di(emperor)” and “Wang(king)”, the humorous and witty usage of terms such as “Yao Huangdi(Emperor Yao)”, “lingdao(leader)”, and “Yushou(sovareign)” is pervading, making it easier for the audience of the source language to comprehend.

3.2 Contradictory Reference

The original text contradicts itself in the depiction of the same object. For instance, King Bieling depicted in the source text shares no synchrony in title with Emperor Bieling who subsequently took the throne after Duyu as recorded in *Biographic Sketches of the Ruler of Shu*. To alleviate the burden of reading on the audience of the translated text, it is imperative to clarify the meaning of “Wang(King)”, “Di(Emperor)”, and “Hou(Feudal lord)” in Ba and Shu to dissolve the contradictions in nomenclature.

3.3 Cultural Parataxis

Relevant cultural background knowledge shared among the source language readers has been omitted in the source text, and these invisible components may lead to cultural disconnection in the target language. The use of “Di” in “Huangdi (the Yellow Emperor)” and “Duyu Di(Emperor

Duyu)” may be taken as an example. “Huangdi”, the emperor of the Three August Ones and the head of the Five Emperors, regardless of the truth about the person, his image has become a supreme totem and common belief of the multi-ethnic unified nation, symbolizing the eternal unity of the Chinese nation^[12]. Duyu, as the leader of a proto-state in the Ba and Shu, claimed himself as an emperor. In the translation process, if both of them were entitled emperor, it may lead to a misunderstanding that the two are equal in status, thus severing the cultural connection.

4. Parallel Texts Analysis

Titles of the rulers in *The Bestowed Realm* are derived from *Records of the Lands South of Mount Hua*, *Biographic Sketches of the Ruler of Shu*, and *Records of the Grand Historian*, but there stand no English translations of the former two. Besides, *Records of the Grand Historian* sees no complete English translation, with only 7 abridged versions published as masterpieces^[13]. The three versions selected are Burton Watson’s (1993)^[14], Yang Xianyi and Yang Gladys’s (1979)^[15], and William H. Nienhauser Jr.’s (2021)^[16].

The translations by Watson, Yang, and Nienhauser are the most extensive and are well accepted^[13]. According to the OCLC database (covering both e-books and paper books), Watson translated 80 chapters of *Records of the Grand Historian*, and the 1993 edition is stored in 353 libraries worldwide. The Yang’s translated 31 chapters, with the 1979 edition held in 236 libraries worldwide. Nienhauser’s team is aiming for a complete translation. With 11 volumes published by Indiana University Press so far, the 2021 edition has been collected in 368 libraries worldwide. Watson’s translation, focusing on readability, has gained recognition, while Yang’s translation, emphasizing narration and conciseness, has further expanded its global acceptance. Oriented by completeness, Nienhauser’s translation meets the expectations of academic readers, enhancing the acceptance of *Records of the Grand Historian* in the West^[17]. Given the backgrounds of the translators and the reception status of the English versions, the translation strategies are bound to differ. Watson, the translator from the US, advocates domestication; the Yang’s, rooted in China, tends to approach both domestication and foreignization to balance originality and readability; Nienhauser, in contrast, focused on foreignization.

CHINESE TERMS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE HISTORY^[18] was officially announced in August 2022 by the China National Committee for Terminology in Science and Technology. The standardized terms include 8 sections e.g. General Introduction, Pre-Qin Period, Qin and Han Dynasties, totaling 3576 entries, all of which contain definitions or annotations. It embodies an authoritative standard that should be followed by historical translation studies pertinent to Chinese history.

On grounds of the aforementioned, this paper tapped into philology and comparative analyses. The three English translations of *Records of the Grand Historian* and *CHINESE TERMS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE HISTORY* may be chosen as the parallel texts to identify the similarities and differences between specific cases.

5. VTT-based Case Analysis

Theoretical guidance is inseparable to translation studies. Since various translation theories exist, when seeking translation methodology, both flexibility and dialectical mindset are pivotal. *The Bestowed Realm* displays a unique narrative rendition of historical archaeology, in which the ruler titles are characterized by demotic expression, contradictory reference, and cultural parataxis. Thus, variation has to engage. Variational translation theory (VTT), an indigenous Chinese theory, has redefined the essence of translation, the role of the source text, the status of the translator, and the objectives of translation. It marks a significant attempt to challenge the hegemony of textual

faithfulness in equivalent translation paradigms. To this end, this paper tries to explore the realm of VTT to yield a new perspective for historical terminological studies.

5.1 Variational Translation Theory

Variational translation theory (VTT) is a scientific principle and ideological system reflecting the essence and law of variational translation in its practice^[19]. Variational Translation is an activity in which the translator, based on the specific needs of target readers under specific conditions, utilizes specific adaptation techniques like adding, deleting, editing, narrating, condensing, integrating, and altering to ingest the content of the original text. It represents the variant of a complete translation, functioning as both a process and a result. In the continuum from complete translation to imitation, the two occupy one end respectively; in the middle, complete translation and variational translation are intertwined^[20]. To reconcile the contradiction between translation and variational translation, it is impossible to adopt a lopsided method. Prioritizing the characteristics of the original text and the target audiences, the variation in this paper refers to the overall equivalence despite partial inequivalence and the overall faithfulness despite partial unfaithfulness.

Variational translation is enslaved to cultural contradictions pertaining to supply and need and semantic contradictions pertinent to form and meaning, encompassing the quadrilateral of readers, translators, objects, and origins. Thus, the choice of adaptation techniques demands deliberation. There are eleven variational translation methods: selected translation, edited translation, narrated translation, condensed translation, summarized translation, summarized transcomment, altered translation, transcomment, annotated translation, transwriting, and cited translation^[19]. In the translation of the titles of rulers in ancient Shu, it is required to ensure that the language used is textually concise, culturally correlated, and informative. Hence, not all variational translation methods are applicable.

5.2 VTT Techniques

The refinement of variational translation techniques lies in adapting the essence and stylistic characteristics of the source text to meet readers' expectations. Building on this recognition, this section delves into alteration, addition, and deletion to promote demoticity, eradicate referential contradiction, and establish a cultural connection. Alteration means change. Generally speaking, the other six variational translation techniques undergo a process similar to altering. It includes alteration (altering the content or form of an original work), re-composition (re-composing the content of an original work), and transformation (transforming the whole original work into a new one). Addition refers to supplementing information that is not present in the original text, comprising annotation, comment, and writing. Deletion means removing the content that the translator deems unnecessary in the source text.

5.2.1 Alteration

In the account of the events related to “Nvwang Li(Queen Li)”, the source text uses “Huangdi(emperor)” to honor Yao. Although the demotic title highlights Yao's status as the legendary supreme ruler to the source readers, the title “Huangdi” should have been used for the monarchs following First Qin Emperor^[21]. For this reason, such demotic titles may go through alteration before transforming into another language. Among the selected three English versions of *Records of The Grand Historian*, Yao is rendered as Emperor, while *CHINESE TERMS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE HISTORY* advocates Yao to be translated as Sage Emperor. The former does not consider whether Yao's jurisdiction at that time could be equated to an empire in the

English-speaking world, while the latter adds sage to illustrate the distinction. Since a translation has been widely accepted by the Western audience, the translator may adopt a “borrow” doctrine to follow the well-established version directly, as long as it does not involve cultural disconnection and discrimination of personality. Nevertheless, in response to the demotic expression of historical archaeology, all identical cases in the source text may be altered to be “Yao shouling” and translated as Leader Yao.

5.2.2 Alteration Plus Deletion

Prior to Duyu, the documented rulers of Ba and Shu refers to multiple leaders of a single dynasty, and titles such as “Cancong” are names of a generation, not of a single person. The twelve generations of the “Kaiming” clan were all titled Kaiming, and Puze” was also the name of a generation; Duyu was the name of a single person^[22]. On grounds of Mao Xi^[23] and Zhao Dianzeng’s^[24-25] study of the lineage of rulers in Ba and Shu, Duan Yu’s^[26] study of the capitals and territories of pre-Qin Shu, and the judgment of the duration of the dynasties of ancient Shu in the source text, the period of the Cancong Dynasty should be situated at a time of about 4,800-4,000 years ago; the “Baodun” culture belongs to the “Baiguan” Dynasty, about 4,500-3,700 years ago; the Duyu Dynasty existed from the late Shang Dynasty to the early Spring and Autumn Period; the Kaiming Dynasty replaced the Duyu Dynasty in the early Spring and Autumn Period, and 316 B.C. saw its demise by the King Huiwen of the Qin state.

The flexible usage of “Di (emperor)” and “Wang(king)” in the process of language conversion, when not tackled properly, will inevitably lead to contradictory references. The rendition of “Bieling Wang” and “Bieling Di” may serve as a vivid case. Duyu entitled himself emperor, and Bieling followed suit. Nevertheless, few rulers of other proto-states in the same period did the same. In the parallel texts, the rulers of the other proto-states with status identical to Bieling have been translated as wang, prince, and king. Given the relationship between Ba, Shu, and the Central Plains, transliteration may fall into zero translation, while the choice of prince will lead to a mistranslation. Thus, all varied yet false references in the source text were trimmed and altered. All reference to Bieling with a title has been unified into “Bieling Wang” and translated as King Bieling. Furthermore, deleting the titles may serve where it is necessary to refer to a generation of leaders of Ba and Shu before Duyu. For instance, “Yufu Wang” may be translated as Yufu.

5.2.3 Alteration Plus Addition

Chinese nouns are often intrinsically related. In the face of the high-context original work with pervading cultural parataxis, cultural disconnection at the linguistic level naturally grows when treated word-for-word. “Huangdi” and “Duyu Di” best fit in with the case. “Huangdi” has been rendered as the Yellow Emperor in the three English versions of *Records of the Grand Historian*, whereas the transliteration Huangdi is supported by *CHINESE TERMS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE HISTORY*.

The ruler titles of Ba and Shu imply the ecological characteristics of the unity of nature and humanity. Cancong is “Can(silkworm)”; Duyu represents “Dujuan(cuckoo)”, and Kaiming embodies “Bie(turtle)”. Giving the title emperor to Duyu is sure to bring forth conceptual confusion and cultural disconnection for the target audiences. Following transliteration is bound to cast away the uniqueness of the Chinese cultural system, leading to obscurity. Be it the commitment to the classic translation or the fidelity to the culture of Ba and Shu, the Chinese and Western cultural systems should be considered in a holistic manner, rather than being limited to the conversion of words.

Upon similar cases, addition may be adopted on the basis of alteration. All texts relative to Duyu

may be rewritten as “Duyu Wang” and translated into English as King Duyu. Besides, annotation may be added as footnotes to supplement the cultural origins of “Duyu entitled himself an emperor” and “cuckoo cries with blood”, facilitating to establish a systematic cultural recognition of Ba and Shu.

6. Conclusions

The titles of rulers of ancient Ba and Shu cover a multi-disciplinary study, e.g. archaeology, history, and political science, posing great challenges to translators. Based on the Pre-Qin Enfeoffment System, the Zhou Kinship System, and the Five Ranks of Nobility, a detailed conceptual analysis identified 43 titles. At the same time, the three versions of *Records of the Grand Historian* translated by Watson, Yang, and Nienhauser, and *CHINESE TERMS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE HISTORY* have been chosen as the parallel texts. Through comparative analysis, it is found that the source text features demotic expression, referential contradiction, and cultural parataxis. The construction of a translation work immersed in the history and culture of Ba and Shu should take the audience as the starting point, and conduct a dialectical rejection of the original. VTT-based techniques may be applicable in the pursuit of the overall equivalence despite partial inequivalence and the overall faithfulness despite partial unfaithfulness. By doing so, we may embark on the journey to discover and promote the cultural heritage of Ba and Shu, witnessing the scenery flashed with splendor in the ever-flowing history.

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