

嚴復：天演論譯例言

General Remarks on Translation

By Yen Fu (1854-1921)

Translated by C. Y. Hsu

Yen Fu, the foremost Chinese translator at the turn of the century, lived in seclusion in Shanghai for seven years during and after the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 and immersed himself in the work of translation. He rendered into Chinese Thomas Huxley's *Ethics and Evolution*, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, Edward Jenks' *A History of Politics*, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty and System of Logic*, Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws*, Herbert Spencer's *Study of Sociology*, and W. S. Jevons' *Primer of Logic*. These translations had great influence upon Chinese thought at the beginning of the 20th century and aroused public awareness of the importance of modernization of China.

Yen translated in a beautiful classical style. His translations often read better than the originals. Though he has been criticized for using too difficult language, he succeeded in winning by this means the attention and admiration of the intelligentsia of his time.

In the opening statement of his "General Remarks on Translation", which prefaced his translation of Huxley's *Ethics and Evolution*, Yen Fu succinctly summed up the art of translation. "Translation," he wrote, "involves three requirements difficult to fulfill: faithfulness, comprehensibility and elegance." These criteria have carried almost canonical force with succeeding generations of Chinese translators, and are endlessly referred to and debated whenever practitioners pause to look into the principles that govern their art.

— Translator

I. Translation involves three requirements difficult to fulfill: faithfulness (信), comprehensibility (達) and elegance (雅). Faithfulness is difficult enough to attain but a translation that is faithful but not comprehensible is no translation at all. Comprehensibility is therefore of prime importance. Since China's opening to foreign trade by sea, there has been no lack of interpreters and translators. But if you assign them any book to translate and tell them to meet these two requirements, few can do so. The reasons for their inability are: superficiality, partiality and lack of discrimination. This book is based on the new knowledge of the West acquired during the last fifty years and was one of the author's later works. My translation attempts to present its profound thought. It does not follow the exact order of words and sentences of the original text but reorganizes and elaborates. However, it does not deviate from the original ideas. It is more an exposition than a translation as it seeks to elaborate — an unorthodox way of transmission. Kumarajiva said: "Whoever imitates me would fall." There will be many others coming after me in translation work; I sincerely hope that they will not use this book as an excuse for their failings.

II. Terms in Western language texts are defined as they occur, somewhat similar to digressions in Chinese. What comes after elaborates what goes before and completes the

sense and structure. A sentence in a Western language consists of from two or three words to tens or hundreds of words. If we should follow this construction in translation, it would not be comprehensible, and if we should delete and abridge, we might miss some of the ideas expressed in the original. When the translator has understood thoroughly and digested the whole text he will then be able to rewrite it in the best manner possible. Since the original is profound in thought and involved in style, which are difficult to convey together, he should correlate what precedes and what follows to bring out the theme. All this effort is to achieve comprehensibility; for only when a piece of translation is comprehensible can it be regarded as faithful.

III. The *I Ching (Book of Changes)* says: "Fidelity is the basis of writing." Confucius said, "Writing should be comprehensible." He also said, "Where language has no refinement, its effects will not extend far." These three dicta set the right course for literature and are the guidelines for translation. In addition to faithfulness and comprehensibility, we should strive for elegance in translation. This is not just for extending the effects far. In using the syntax and style of the pre-Han period one actually facilitates the comprehensibility of the profound principles and subtle thoughts whereas in using the modern vernacular one finds it difficult to make things comprehensible. Oftentimes, straining the meaning but slightly to fit the language can result in gross misinterpretations. Inevitably I had to make a choice between these two media, not that I have a preference for the eccentric. My translation has been criticized for its abstruse language and involved style. But I must say this is the result of my determined effort at comprehensibility. The treatise in the book is largely based upon logic, mathematics and science as well as astronomy. If a reader is not familiar with these studies, even if he is of the same nationality and speaks the same language as the author, he won't be able to comprehend much, far less by reading a translation.

IV. New theories have been advanced in quick succession, giving rise to a profusion of new terms. No such terms could be found in Chinese. Though some Chinese expressions approximate the original, there are yet discrepancies. Confronted with such a situation, a translator can only use his own judgment and coin a term according to the sense. But this is easier said than done. For instance, Part I of this book consists of more than ten prolegomena. These are simple introductory remarks on the profound treatise. I first translated "prolegomena" as *chih yen* (discursive remarks). But Hsia Sui-ch'ing (Tseng-yu) of Ch'ien-t'ang said this term was trite and suggested *hsuan t'an* (discursive talks), which is found in the Buddhist scriptures. When the venerable Wu Chih-fu (Ju-lun) of T'ung-ch'eng saw my translation, he said that since *chih yen* had become trite and *hsuan t'an* was derived from Buddhism, and neither was not what an independent mind would adopt, it would be better to follow the precedent set by the ancient Chinese philosophers of giving a heading to each chapter. Sui-ch'ing argued that in that case each chapter would become an essay by itself and this would be contradictory to the original plan of treating one theme in the book. However, in the terms *hsuan t'an* and *hsuan shu* (discursive commentary) the word *hsuan* means "attached". It connotes a summary or gist of some basic idea and does not correspond to the present sense. The term therefore should not be used. So I followed the original heading, translating it as *tao yen* (introductory remarks) and, accepting Wu's suggestion, supplied a subhead to each chapter for the convenience of the reader. This shows the difficulty of determining a term, and in going about the task one can hardly escape the criticism of being half-baked.

Other terms such as *wu ching* (struggle for existence), *t'ien tse* (natural selection), *ch'u neng* (potentiality) and *hsiao shih* (actuality) are my creations. The determination of a term often took a full month's pondering. I leave it to the discerning and wise to commend or condemn me.

V. The book deals mainly with the schools of thought since ancient Greece. Included are the renowned thinkers of various periods whose thoughts have influenced the minds of the people of the West for some two thousand years. Whoever engages in Western studies should know about them. At the end of a chapter I record briefly the lives and achievements of these men for the reference of scholars who may want to know about them and their times.

VI. The pursuit of truth is akin to the practice of government in that both place a premium on the pooling of ideas. Where the present work agrees or differs with other books, from what I know I note them in the postscript for the reader's reference. Now and then I inject my personal views in the spirit of "Seeking Friends" in the *Shih Ching* (Book of Odes) and "Mutual Encouragement and Assistance" in the *I Ching*. Whether my views are sound or not I leave to public judgment. I do not insist on my own rectitude. If anyone should accuse me of being pretentious and seeking notoriety for myself, he misunderstands my intention in taking great pains to translate this book.

(For Chinese text see page 126)

Laws of Translation

I would therefore describe a good translation to be, That, in which the merit of the original work is so completely transfused into another language, as to be as distinctly apprehended, and as strongly felt, by a native of the country to which that language belongs, as it is by those who speak the language of the original work.

Now, supposing this description to be a just one, which I think it is, let us examine what are the laws of translation which may be deduced from it.

It will follow.

I. That the Translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work.

II. That the style and manner of writing should be of the same character with that of the original.

III. That the Translation should have all the ease of original composition.

—ALEXANDER FRASER TYTLER (Lord Woodhouselee)
Essay on the Principles of Translation, 1791.

Moreover, general translations are about translating documents and texts that are not technical. Some examples of these files are business training materials, general business documents, handwritten letters, recorded conversations, broadcast news footage, and any type of document that only contains slang. At first sight, anyone could do general translation. All they need is basic knowledge of the two languages involved and a couple dictionaries and there you go, you have your document translated.Â General translation is very generally requested service. Even though it is estimated the uncomplicated type of translation and usually doesnâ€™t need expert subject knowledge, a basic understanding of two languages and some references are not enough to perform a good quality translation.