

Between Rigor and Reverence. Yu Dafu and His Views on Translation

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Abstract Despite his prominence in modern Chinese literature and the significant role played by translation in his literary career, Yu Dafu's (1896-1945) activity as a translation theorist and practitioner remains largely unexplored. Yu translated into Chinese a number of short stories, treatises, and poems by such authors as Wilde, Twain, Sinclair, Nietzsche, and Rousseau; he also devoted several essays to the issue of translation and its practice. Through an analysis of Yu's theoretical writings, I aim to provide a brief account of his reflections on the subjectivity of the translator, the principles of a desirable translating practice, the relation between translation and original writing, and the cultural significance of translation. By doing so, I wish to highlight the seminal role played by such a reflection in Yu's artistic career, as well as the specificity of his contribution within the intellectual debate on translation in his time.

Keywords Yu Dafu. Translation. Theory of translation. Literary creation. Cultural innovation.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Yu Dafu's Translating Career. – 3 Yu Dafu's Views on Translation. – 3.1 The Translator's Subjectivity. – 3.2 The Principles and Ethics of Translation. – 3.3 Translation and Original Writing. – 3.4 Translation, cultural agency, and intellectual critique. – 4 Conclusion.



Peer review

Submitted	2021-01-14
Accepted	2021-05-11
Published	2021-06-30

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Citation Magagnin, P. (2021). "Between Rigor and Reverence. Yu Dafu and His Views on Translation". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 57, 443-456.

1 Introduction

Yu Dafu 郁達夫 (1896-1945), a leading figure of the Creation Society (*Chuangzaoshe* 創造社), holds a special position in the variegated literature linked to the so-called May Fourth Movement (*Wusi yundong* 五四運動) of 1919. He first came to prominence thanks to *Sinking* (*Chenlun* 沈淪, 1921), the earliest short story collection in modern Chinese literature.¹ The three stories featured therein reveal the influence of imported models – the Japanese ‘I-novel’ (*shishōsetsu* 私小説) and European Romanticism, the philosophy of Nietzsche and Rousseau, the Biblical tradition etc. – and, most notably, incorporate passages from foreign texts, both in their original language and in Chinese translation. Indeed, such a feature emerges throughout Yu Dafu’s artistic production, and the scholarship on the writer unsurprisingly stresses the central role of foreign sources – mostly absorbed while he was studying in Japan (1913-1922) – in the shaping of his literary universe.

Yu Dafu also devoted himself to translation in the strict sense of the term throughout his artistic career.² His reflections on translation, however sparse, reveal a theoretical framework characterised by a certain degree of consistency. The role of translated and foreign texts in Yu’s fiction has been scrutinised by some scholars (Levan 2012; Chen 2012; Liu 2017). A specific analysis of his views on, and practice of, translation is the object of several Chinese-language studies,³ some carried out from a comparative perspective (Li 2004; Su, Jie 2012). However, research on this facet of his career remains peripheral and, to my knowledge, no Western-language study has been explicitly devoted to it. By setting out from these studies and drawing on primary sources – namely, Yu’s essays on translation-related topics, as well as a selection of significant paratexts supplementing his translations – I aim to provide a brief account of his activity as a translator, followed by some remarks on his theoretical vision.

I wish to express my gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers for their extremely detailed and helpful comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript, which have helped me fine-tune the present article.

1 For an English translation of “Sinking”, one of the three short stories included in the collection of the same name, see Yu 1995.

2 An exhaustive collection of Yu Dafu’s translated poetry, fiction, and essays can be found in voll. 11 and 12 of *Yu Dafu wenji* 郁達夫文集 (Collected Works of Yu Dafu) (Yu 1984). Due to space limits, a detailed list of Yu’s translations, including such information as the original titles of the foreign works, the specific edition used by Yu, the date of first publication of the translations etc. is not included here. However, it could be incorporated in further research focusing more specifically on Yu’s practice of translation.

3 Chen 1984; Pan 1984; Shen 1988; Hu, Zhang 2004; Chen 2010; Liu 2010; Xian 2010, 187-95; Zhang 2010; 2011; Zhang, Ma 2013; Wang, Kou 2014.

2 Yu Dafu's Translating Career

According to Shen (1988), Yu Dafu's activity as a translator can be divided into three phases, namely the periods 1921-27, 1927-33, and 1933-45. Yu published his first efforts in *Creation Quarterly* (*Chuang-zao jikan* 創造季刊, 1922-24), one of the Creation Society journals. The very first issue, published in March 1922, tellingly featured Yu's translation of the "Introduction" to Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, both an homage to a much-admired writer and a manifesto of the Creation Society itself, which at the time had adopted the tenets of Aestheticism wholeheartedly. This was Yu's most prolific period as a writer of short fiction: ever since *Sinking*, he began to insert translated excerpts of (mainly poetic) foreign works into his own stories, diaries, and essays, a feature that would characterise his style in the years to come. Indeed, at the beginning of the story that gives its name to *Sinking*, the protagonist is memorably introduced as he struggles with the Chinese translation of Wordsworth's *The Solitary Reaper*. Although at the time translation did not play a conspicuous role in Yu Dafu's writing, at least as an autonomous activity, it is in this early period that a strong connection between translation and original creation began to emerge.

The second phase in Yu's translating career is intimately linked to his parting from the Creation Society, in August 1927, and his involvement in other prominent literary journals. Shortly after leaving Creation, he became a close collaborator of Lu Xun's 魯迅 (1881-1936): he had met him in Beijing in 1923, and had already contributed some short essays to his journal *Threads of Words* (*Yusi* 語絲, 1924-30). In late 1927, Yu started working as co-editor of the journal *Torrent* (*Benliu* 奔流, 1928), also directed by Lu Xun in Shanghai. After *Torrent* was shut down by the Kuomintang, Yu became editor-in-chief of *Mass Literature and Art* (*Dazhong wenyi* 大眾文藝, 1928-30). In 1930 the journal became the voice of the League of Left-Wing Writers of China (*Zhongguo zuoyi zuojia lianmeng* 中國左翼作家聯盟, 1930-36) - co-founded by Lu Xun in the spring of 1930 and initially counting Yu among its members - and was consequently outlawed a few months later. The years 1927-33 marked an unmatched peak in Yu's translation efforts, which by then had become an essential part of his work. A striking number of short novels, poems and essays translated in this period appeared in journals or were published shortly afterwards in the collections *Five Minor Writers* (*Xiao jia zhi wu* 小家之伍) (Yu 1930), *A Few Great Writers* (*Jige weida de zuojia* 幾個偉大的作家) (Yu 1934), and *Dafu's Collected Translations*

of *Short Stories* (*Dafu suo yi duanpian ji* 達夫所譯短篇集 (Yu 1935).⁴

After ending his collaboration with the League, disillusioned with his own political engagement in the proletarian cause, Yu retired to Hangzhou in April 1933. In 1936 he began a collaboration with Lin Yutang 林語堂's (1896-1976) satirical journal *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語, 1932-49). His fiction writing had already come to a stop by 1935 but he continued to translate, although at a considerably reduced pace. Some translation projects were only envisaged, while others were never completed, as in the case of Lin's English-language memoir *A Moment in Peking*, first published in 1939. After the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-45), Yu fled to Hong Kong, Singapore and then Sumatra, where he took on a new identity to escape arrest by the Japanese occupiers. There he also acted as a linguistic mediator between the Chinese-speaking community and the Japanese, while allegedly cooperating with the local resistance. Ironically, his role as an undercover translator and interpreter may have proven fatal to him: although the actual circumstances of his death remain unclear to date, he was most likely exposed and 'disappeared' by the Kempeitai, the Japanese military police, in the August of 1945.⁵

3 Yu Dafu's Views on Translation

3.1 The Translator's Subjectivity

The late 1910s mark a time of unparalleled cultural receptiveness in the history of China. The translation of foreign works is naturally seen as a channel for introducing new theories and ideas that could help rejuvenate the country and shape a new 'national character'. The selection of the works to be translated is largely instrumental and driven by the enlightening effect that such works are expected to exert on the Chinese readership. This is certainly the primary preoccupation for a number of prominent May Fourth intellectuals engaging in the practice of translation, such as Lu Xun himself – who, in selecting the candidates for translation, favours not only texts that are of interest to him, but also those that could “prove useful to China” (Gu 2009, 28).

Yu Dafu somehow deviates from this general tendency. He certainly does not disregard the cultural significance of the transla-

⁴ The three collections were all published in Shanghai. *Five Minor Writers* (Yu 1930) contains the translation of five short stories by Friedrich Gerstäcker, Rudolf Lindau, Juhani Aho, Mary E. Wilkins, and Liam O'Flaherty. *A Few Great Writers* (Yu 1934) includes four translated essays by Maksim Gorky, Ivan Turgenev, Havelock Ellis, and Felix Poppenberg. Finally, *Dafu's Collected Translations of Short Stories* (Yu 1935), contains three texts by Theodor Storm, George Moore, and – again – Liam O' Flaherty.

⁵ For further details on Yu Dafu's biography, see Fang 2012.

tor's agency (see below), and the desire to give voice to progressive authors whose social concerns Yu shares at a certain point of his career. Indeed, his translation of George Moore's and Liam O' Flaherty's short stories may be driven by such considerations (Hu, Zhang 2004). However, his interest seems to be primarily artistic and sentimental in nature, and his criteria for the selection of works eligible for translation are primarily based on personal taste, as shown by the oft-cited quote "I only translate the things I love"⁶ (Yu 2007j, 155). His choices are largely influenced by his predilection for fin-de-siècle Euro-American literature, as well as for works characterised by the same lyrical and melancholic sensibility that inspire his original writing. While he does not neglect such masters of literature and philosophy as Wilde or Nietzsche, he also turns his attention to authors like Friedrich Gerstäcker or Mary E. Wilkins. By giving a voice to 'minor writers' (*xiaojia* 小家), he resists the general prescription to focus on famous names and discard less celebrated ones, thus enriching the spectrum of foreign literature available in Chinese at the time (Zhang 2011, 43).

Yu's candidates for translation are typically authors with whom he feels a degree of affinity and shares an emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual sensibility, or even a similar life experience. He also seems to express his preference for works and authors showing a connection between East and West. This is the case with Rudolf Lindau, whose *Das Glückspendel* (The Philosopher's Pendulum) he translates in 1928: in an essay, it is suggested that the writer

was influenced by the East; the Buddhist notion of 'calm and extinction' was deep-rooted in his mind. (Yu 2007k, 170)

Yu even states that

when we read his stories, we do not feel that he is a foreign author at all. (170)

Finally, Yu repeatedly stresses the crucial role of the translator in the process, affirming that

the author should be credited for the flavor of the original text, but the flavor of the translation must be the translator's work. (2007l, 402)

6 All translations from the Chinese originals are by the Author.

3.2 The Principles and Ethics of Translation

Right from his early reflections on translation, Yu Dafu constantly praises the time-honoured principles of *fidelity* (*xin* 信), *fluency* (*da* 達), and *elegance* (*ya* 雅), first articulated by Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854-1921) in the late nineteenth century. Yu sees them as largely relevant even in his time (Yu 2007l, 401) and as a prerequisite for an excellent translation (Yu 2007g, 487); moreover, he devotes special attention to *elegance*, stressing its importance in ensuring the pleasure of reading for his contemporaries (Yu 2007l, 402). However, he considers these tenets to be mere “external conditions of the translation” (*fanyi de wai de tiaojian* 翻譯的外的條件): he therefore proposes an additional triad that would embrace the “internal conditions of the translator” (*fanyizhe de nei de tiaojian* 翻譯者的內的條件), namely *knowledge* (*xue* 學), *mentality* (*si* 思) and *understanding* (*de* 得) (Yu 2007c, 111). By stressing the role of *knowledge*, Yu emphasises the fact that a translator must become familiar not only with the foreign work and its language, but also with the life experience of the author and the socio-cultural background that has fostered said work. To do so, the translator is required to read extensively not only the author’s work as a whole, but also his/her diaries and letters, as well as the remarks made by his/her contemporaries (117). *Mentality* refers to the translator’s ability to make the original author’s mindset his/her own, an intimate operation that proves crucial if one wishes to effectively convey the ideas and sensibility of a foreign writer to a target readership (118). Finally, *understanding* can only be achieved through an in-depth grasp of the author’s and the work’s spirit, as well as through an awareness of the spatial and temporal distance that separate the latter from the sensibility of the intended target audience (118).

When it comes to translation, Yu Dafu is, by his own account, a perfectionist who firmly adheres to the principle of *rigorism* (*yangezhu yi* 嚴格主義) (117). He purportedly expects so much of himself that he hardly dares to publish the fruit of his efforts (119) and, even when he does, he engages in constant proofreading to correct any mistakes or unsatisfying phrasings (2007j, 155). Yu’s meticulousness can be best seen in the extensive paratexts that complement his translations. These include, of course, the prefaces and postfaces expressing his views on literature and translation, some of which are self-standing essays in their own right, abounding with observations on the process of translation and revision (see Yu 2007f). Other paratexts contain profiles of authors and works, notes on the publishing history of the original, lexical annotations, and explanations of cultural phenomena and references.

Examples of this praxis are legion, but the translation of Upton Sinclair’s essay “Mammon Art”, carried out between 1928 and 1929, may be the most representative one (Yu 2007e). The text is preced-

ed by an extremely detailed introduction covering a broad array of issues: the fact that Yu has borrowed the Chinese title (*Bajjin yishu* 拜金藝術, literally “Money-worshipping Art”) from a Japanese translation by Kimura Shōji (1908-?); the motivation behind his choice to translate this treatise in particular; the acknowledgment of the help provided by Lin Yutang, Lin’s wife, and Kimura; the quotation of a recent scholarly work on the author that helped him in the process; an extensive, year-by-year biography of the author and his output; Yu’s personal remarks and his reasons for admiring Sinclair; and, finally, a list of Sinclair’s works not cited above (200-12). However, it is in the notes following each chapter that Yu best reveals his philological approach. He comments upon the difficulties encountered in the process, as in the case of the short poems included in the essay, rendered by drawing inspiration from classical Chinese poetry with a few adjustments and additions of his own (228). He also describes the thought processes that led him to select a specific Chinese lexical item (228, 254), asks for the readers’ help (220, 239-40), and thanks one of them for suggesting certain improvements (258) (this being possible because the essay was originally published in instalments). Yu defends his choice to skip some lines and even entire chapters of the original, based on the assumption that his readers would have no interest in matters that were too distant from their own experience (257-8, 266); the same applies to his omissions of references to Latin literature, “perhaps an unforgivable crime of infidelity in translation”, committed for the lack of other options (278).

A strong critic of retranslation, Yu admittedly resorts to it only on rare occasions, by relying on German versions - which he deems more accurate than English, French or Japanese ones - whenever possible (Yu 2007j, 155). Another indicator of his meticulousness is the frequent choice to quote the original text along with the translation, be it a short poem (as was always the case in his early poetic translations and even in some passages of his own early fiction), a word or a phrase: by doing so, he wishes to provide reference material for readers to reflect autonomously on his translation choices, verify their accuracy, and suggest improvements. Indeed, Yu stresses the significance of what today we would call ‘translation criticism’. He often offers comments on the work of others, as he does in great detail with Wang Tongzhao’s 王統照 (1897-1957) translations of Ernest Dowson’s poems (Yu 2007c). In another essay, after criticizing the ignorance that dominates the world of newspapers and journals, he goes on to dissect the Chinese rendition of Rudolf C. Eucken’s *Der Sinn und Wert des Lebens* (The Meaning and Value of Life) by an unspecified translator who relied on an English retranslation (Yu 2007a). By lamenting the sloppiness of these versions and pointing out the translators’ mistakes, he does not wish to hold them up to derision. By his own account,

my purpose is not at all to mock them; I just wish everybody would be a little more careful, so as to avoid being ridiculed by foreigners. (4)

He is particularly harsh in his denunciation of improvised translators: in the China of his time, he writes,

people who do not know a word of a foreign language dabble in translation by using archaisms, [while] those who know but a little bit [...] are praised as translation experts. (2007h, 43)

Such pseudo-translators, Yu continues, translate word-by-word by merely relying on dictionaries (43). Yu's passionate defence of his own translation choices are also memorable, especially when he responds to the criticism levelled by Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1962) (Yu 2007b) and Liang Shiqiu 梁實秋 (1903-1987) (Yu 2007d).

3.3 Translation and Original Writing

One of the constant preoccupations that emerge from Yu's reflections is the consistency between original writing and translation, not only in terms of sensibility, but also in terms of literary style. The concept of an expressive continuum between the two poles of Yu's output is exemplified by his claim:

to the fullest possible extent, [my translations] should resemble my own writings; of course, the message of the author has to be kept in mind, too, but the translation must be phrased as if I had written it myself. (2007j, 155-6)

The influence of Yu's translations on his original writing is not surprising, as shown by the resonances that can be observed in some of his own short stories (Shen 1988, 126-7). Indeed, the aesthetic consistency between the two practices has been noticed at the level of character psychology, sentimentalism, and Yu's predilection for the lyrical over plot-building (Zhang, Ma 2013). Interestingly enough, the genuineness of Yu's claim is corroborated by the fact that, upon its publication, Yu's translation of Lindau's *Das Glücksspendel* was believed by the prominent contemporary author Shen Congwen 沈從文 (1902-1988) to be an original story of his, written under a foreign alias (Xian 2010, 188).

The challenging nature of translation, which Yu considers to be more arduous a process than writing itself, is also often emphasised: "translating is not a simple thing indeed" (Yu 2007j, 155), he states, adding that "translating requires a greater effort than doing some dull writing of my own" (156); "as for translation, I have

always thought it to be an even harder job than creation" (2007m, 449). Whereas, in writing, one can produce a final manuscript after a couple rounds of revision, Yu believes this is impossible to achieve in a translation, even after it has been reviewed ten or twenty times (449). He also professes to feel a sort of *reverence* (*wei* 畏) (Wang, Kou 2014, 135) that makes it hard for him to engage in the translation of classical or 'pure' literature, as if he were "fettered by the original author whenever [he] put pen to paper", a process that he finds "countless times more laborious than casually scribbling a few poetry lines of [his] own" (Yu 2007l, 402). Despite all these difficulties, in Yu's artistic vision, translation proves an excellent exercise for the writer: it is helpful even when it is done for entertainment, because it "is indeed the perfect way to experience a change of flavor", and is beneficial in that

firstly, you can practice your technique; secondly, it cultivates the brain; thirdly, you can preserve your writing skills. (2007i, 54)

3.4 Translation, Cultural Agency, and Intellectual Critique

From the aspects we have discussed so far it is manifest that a strong connection exists, for Yu Dafu, between writing, translation, the dissemination of foreign knowledge, and theoretical reflection.

By relying on his strong subjectivity, Yu remains faithful to an all-round intellectual agenda. A true agent of translation, he "[goes] against the grain, challeng[ing] commonplaces and contemporary assumptions", "selecting new works to be translated and introducing new styles of translation for works entering [his] own society" (Milton, Bandia 2009, 1-2). Although his concerns are primarily aesthetic, he also sees translation as a tool for nurturing national culture, and the increasing number of translations made available in China as a very positive phenomenon (Yu 2007j, 156). The influence of imported models, however, should not be overstated, and caution should be exercised when faced with so-called intellectuals who

pick up a few superficial speeches made by some foreigners, patch together a translation, and then pass themselves off as new thinkers. (2007a, 3)

By Yu's own account,

foreign works are only a point of reference for us, not an inheritance handed down by our ancestors; but once I have revised and compiled these translations, I do hope my fellow countrymen will strive further. (2007j, 156)

For such a virulent polemist as Yu, translation is also an ideal outlet to convey his intellectual critique, condemning what he considers to be ‘scandals of translation’ and their perpetrators. As shown above, cutting remarks against uneducated and sloppy translators are ubiquitous in his essays. Even more interestingly, however, the paratexts of his translations are brimming with personal, apparently casual commentaries that transcend both the text at hand and translation matters, touching upon the society, politics, and cultural circles of his time. For instance, in the translation of “Mammon Art” mentioned above, Yu uses his notes as a pretext to denounce those opportunistic Chinese intellectuals who, unlike his beloved Sinclair, are only concerned about securing their status (Yu 2007e, 211). He criticises those writers who once endorsed revolutionary ideals but now sympathise with the ruling class, the tyrannical government or the Japanese, like his fellow Creation Society member Cheng Fangwu 成仿吾 (1897-1984) (246-7), and attacks the narrow-mindedness and sectarianism of literary critics (262).

4 Conclusion

Yu Dafu’s practice and critique of translation cannot compete with his original output, in terms of quantity or intellectual impact. In this field, Yu hardly achieved the degree of systematicity we find among other influential May Fourth writers-cum-translators. Yet, these aspects still play a central role in his artistic life: significantly enough, the reflection on translation-related matters proved a constant preoccupation, one that did not cease even after he put an end to his career as short fiction writer and drastically reduced his output as a translator. Yu’s thoughts and remarks may not have been developed into a well-structured *theory* of translation – at least not in the sense we think of this term today – but they still show a high degree of coherence and critical insight. In this brief overview, I have attempted to pinpoint the features of Yu’s activity as a translator and the basic principles around which his theoretical views revolve, focusing on the subjectivity of the translator, the principles of a desirable translating practice, the correlation between translation and original writing, and the role of translation and its theorisation as a channel for cultural innovation and intellectual critique. In doing so, I have sought to highlight the prominence of translation as both a practice and critical object in Yu’s intellectual endeavour, as well as to emphasise his distinctive contribution at a time of unparalleled cultural ebullience in the history of modern China.

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