

# A Comparative Analysis of the Translator's Identities of Robert Morrison and Yan Fu in Two Chinese Translations of the Bible

Huixin Xian

Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, China

Email: Xianhuixin289@163.com

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**Abstract**—The Bible, as a classic work of Christianity, holds an important position in the world literary history, and its translation into Chinese has been a difficult and complicated process. This paper selects two Translators Robert Morrison and Yan Fu, as well as their Chinese translations of the Bible as the research objects. Through a comparative analysis of the cultural identities of these two translators, the paper elucidates the influence of different translator identities on their translation behavior. The study found that based on different cultural identities, Morrison and Yan Fu presented different emphases in terms of the text selection and different translation characteristics of the two Chinese translations of the Bible.

**Keywords**—translator's identity, translation of the Bible, Robert Morrison, Yan Fu

## I. INTRODUCTION

In China, the translation of the Bible into Chinese began almost 1400 years ago. During this period, people from different professions, such as missionaries, sinologists and translators, translated selected passages or the entire Bible into Chinese, playing a positive role in the dissemination and acceptance of Christian culture in China. As two representative figures of the Chinese translation of the Bible, British missionary Robert Morrison opened the prelude to the modern Chinese translation of the Bible, while Yan Fu, a famous modern enlightenment thinker and translator, retained a strong personal style in his translation of the Gospel of Mark, paving the way for Chinese independent translation of the Bible. This paper starts from the perspective of the translator's identity, selects two Chinese translations of the Bible by Morrison and Yan Fu for study, aims to interpret the translator's identity of the two translators, explore the influence of the translator's identity on the expression of the translation, and make up for the shortcomings of the research on the Chinese translation of the Bible.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. The Literature Review of the Research on the Chinese Translation of the Bible

Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam are considered the three major religions in the world. As the religious classic of Christianity, the Bible is regarded as one of the "one hundred translations that have influenced modern Chinese society [1]," which contains both the Old and New Testaments. The Bible has been translated many times, with over 1,600 versions and translations in more than 2,000 languages, making it the most published book in the world. Its influence far surpasses that of any other book.

There is no shortage of research on the Chinese translation

of the Bible both domestically and internationally. Abroad, De Gruttola, Raissa conducted an analysis and comparison of two Chinese versions of the Bible, the Union Version and the Sigao Bible. After briefly introducing the translation process of both versions, the two translators' attitudes towards missionary work and the translation of Protestantism were outlined. Finally, by studying and comparing several passages from the Gospel of John in both versions, the characteristics of the two translation versions were analyzed [2]. Janice Wicker also conducted research on the Union Version of the Bible [3]. Benoît Vermander investigates the impact of the Bible on the social, political, and cultural landscape of 21st century China in a scholarly manner [4].

Chinese scholar Ma Jinhua conducted research on how the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) defended its "unannotated" principle in late Qing China, using case studies to demonstrate the tension between the ideals and realities of protestant missionary groups [5]. Ren Dongsheng compared Bible translation with Buddhist sutra translation from a new perspective, exploring the similarities and differences between the two [6].

In summary, domestic and foreign scholars studying the Chinese translation of the Bible have focused on four aspects: reviewing and organizing the Chinese translation activities of the Bible, discussing the translation strategies and principles of the Bible, analyzing the impact of the Chinese translation of the Bible on the spread of Christian culture, and studying the literature of Bible translation. These studies are mainly engaged with the translation history and cross-cultural communication. Although some scholars have compared different Chinese translations of the Bible, especially the Union Version with others, the research lacks comparative studies of the translation characteristics of different Chinese and foreign translators of the Bible based on their identities as translators.

### B. The Literature Review of the Research on Translator's Identity

Language is the fundamental tool of interpersonal communication, and it serves as the primary means of social interaction. Identity serves as a marker of who a person is and where they stand within their social network. The study of language and identity has garnered considerable attention in recent years. Since Labov's research on linguistic variation in the 1960s, our understanding of the relationship between language and identity has evolved from "Perceiving it as non-existent to recognizing its undeniable influence, from considering it a one-way influence to acknowledging its

reciprocal nature, and from studying it as a group behavior to examining it as an individual phenomenon” [7]. This field of research draws upon the disciplines of linguistics, individual psychology, and sociology, exploring the relationship between language and identity from various perspectives such as variation studies, pragmatics, social psychology, discourse ethnography, critical discourse analysis and so on.

The study of translator’s identity is primarily divided into three aspects. Firstly, there is the macro-level social identity research conducted on translators. In this regard, scholars have overwhelmingly focused on the study of gender and translation. Liu’s [8] research on women’s identity and translation behavior indicates that feminist translation practices have risen to become a political action aimed at creating a feminist cultural context, with considerations also given to national and ethnic identity perspective. Secondly, there is the comparative analysis of cultural identities among different translators of the same literary work. For example, Zhang Sisi’s research interprets translator identity from three aspects: life experiences, educational background, and work background. Based on this, she analyzes the stylistic differences among the three Chinese translations of *The Great Gatsby* by three renowned translators [9]. Lastly, there is the study that summarizes the unique identities of translators. Tan and Tian’s [10] research examines the issue of multiple identities reflected by translators in the translation process. Tan metaphorically compares translators to fourteen different roles including painters, actors, photographers, businessmen and so on, thereby endowing them with fourteen identities. Tian, on the other hand, believes that during the translation process, translators possess four identities: reader, author, creator, and translator.

### III. THE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF MORRISON AND YAN FU

The concept of “cultural identity” in translation studies can be traced back to Venuti [11], referring to “the self-image of an individual, a collective, or a nation, as recognized in comparison with others”. The core of cultural identity lies in values or value systems. In the context of translation activities, translators construct their own distinct cultural identities within different cultural systems, which inevitably have significant impacts on the selection and expression of the translated text. Therefore, it is essential to interpret the cultural identities of both Morrison and Yan Fu before conducting a comparative analysis of their translations of the Chinese Bible.

#### A. *The Cultural Identity of Morrison*

In the history of cultural exchange between the East and the West, it is undeniable that western missionaries played an important role. Morrison was the first Protestant missionary to come to China. Born in a poor family, he had been devoted to the study of the Bible and other religious books since childhood under the influence of his father’s religious thoughts. In 1807, he was sent by the London Missionary Society to Guangzhou, China, where he began his lifelong missionary career in China. Before Morrison came to China to undertake the mission of translating the Bible into Chinese, Westerners had always been skeptical about the possibility of translating the Bible into Chinese. Some opposed the translation of the Bible into Chinese, believing that it would lead to a misinterpretation of the Bible, while others believed

that writing and recognizing Chinese characters was extremely difficult, and some even asserted that “the Bible is inherently untranslatable” [12]. This created a situation where no Westerner dared to translate the Bible into Chinese. In addition, at that time, the Qing government implemented strict measures to ban Christianity, which forced Morrison to secretly translate the Bible at the risk of his life. With the support of the British and Foreign Bible Society, he completed the translation of the New Testament in 1813, and later co-translated the Old Testament with Milne, completing it in 1819. In 1823, the New and Old Testaments were combined into one and then published as *Shentian Shengshu*.

Morrison’s *Shentian Shengshu* was the first complete Chinese Bible in China and also the first complete Chinese Bible to be circulated in Europe. This broke the situation where Confucian culture dominated China, and China began to develop towards modern culture [13]. Apart from fulfilling his responsibilities as a western missionary by translating and introducing the Bible, Robert Morrison also became a renowned sinologist, tirelessly studying Chinese characters and classical literature, and enthusiastically promoting Western culture in China. In 1815, with the assistance of Milne, Morrison founded the *Chinese Monthly Magazine*, and in 1818, he established the Anglo-Chinese College in Macao. Additionally, in 1820, Morrison opened a hospital in Macao [14]. Although Morrison’s primary goal in coming to China was to spread the Christian faith, his groundbreaking work during his time in China undoubtedly facilitated cultural exchange between the East and West, with his translation career playing a particularly significant role.

#### B. *The Cultural Identity of Yan Fu*

As a prominent thinker in modern China, Yan Fu was known for his high literary achievement. In addition to this, he also had great accomplishments in translation. Yan Fu translated foreign works such as Herbert Spencer’s *Evolution and Ethics*, Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of Laws*, and Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. Yan Fu introduced Western theories through his own translations with the aim of reforming Chinese thought and ultimately preserving Chinese culture. Many of his translations had already gained high reputation in various circles in China at the time and his translation ability was recognized, with George Henry Bondfield calling him “one of the best scholars in contemporary China”.

As a translator, Yan Fu devoted himself to translation for more than two decades. However, it wasn’t until the 21st century that his translation of fragments from the Bible was taken seriously by Chinese scholars. Yan Fu’s understanding of Christianity began around 1877–1879, when he studied in England. He proactively sought to learn about Christianity and the activities of missionaries in China, bridging the gap between Eastern and Western cultures. His mission was to enlighten the masses, which led him to translate a vast amount of Christian literature, including the Bible. His intention was to “elevate the Bible to the status of a great classic among Chinese people [15]”. Like Morrison, Yan Fu’s translation of the Bible also had close ties with the London Missionary Society and the British and Foreign Bible Society, and it can be said that the two organizations were the common sponsors for Bible translation. However, although Yan Fu had an unparalleled knowledge of Western learning,

he was not a Christian. The first four chapters of his translation of the Gospel of Mark were done with the approval of the British and Foreign Bible Society and entrusted to him by George Henry Bondfield, the British representative stationed in Shanghai. Though Yan Fu did spread Western cultural ideas, fundamentally he did so in order to liberate the minds of his fellow countrymen, which is quite the opposite of what Morrison did, embodying a deep identification with his own national culture and a strong patriotism.

#### IV. TRANSLATION BEHAVIOR UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

##### A. Text Selection under the Influence of Cultural Identity

By comparing the cultural identities of Robert Morrison and Yan Fu, who both translated the Bible into Chinese, we can see their differences in cultural identity first resulted in differences in their text selections. As a devout Christian, Morrison had strong perseverance and consciousness, as evidenced by his initiative to undertake the translation of the Bible into Chinese, with the purpose of propagating Christian doctrine and accepting Christ's salvation in China. Therefore, he could undertake the full translation work of the Bible into Chinese and make it his lifelong career.

On the other hand, Yan Fu, as a non-Christian, who barely had contact with church people, did not translate the Bible out of a sense of responsibility and mission like Morrison did. The reason why Yan Fu started his translation of the Bible lies in two aspects: firstly, the British and Foreign Bible Society paid him a considerable fee for his translation of the Bible. Secondly, Yan Fu accepted the commission to translate the Bible was because "although we cannot rule out the possibility of interest, we still believe that Yan Fu's translation of the Bible is not accidental, but conforms to his thoughts [16]". So it can also be said that Yan Fu's translation of the Bible was motivated by a concern for the salvation of the Chinese people. Although he also felt that Chinese people had no understanding of Christianity and the Bible, still expected to "fill the gap in Chinese research of Western religion [17]". From his shelving of the translation of the Bible while translating other works, he was not as fervent in pursuit of faith in Christianity as Morrison was. Without the initiative of the Bible Society, he might not have chosen the Bible as his translation object, which also explains why Yan Fu did not continue to translate the entire *Gospel of Mark*.

##### B. Translation Characteristics Under The Influence of Cultural Identity

"In any translation activity, the translator plays a decisive role as the subject of the process and is responsible for reinterpreting and expressing the author's original thoughts. The translator possesses a unique identity in this process. A good translation work is not only the crystallization of the translator's reinterpretation and expression of the original work, but also serves as proof of the translator's unique characteristics [18]". Translation is the process of converting language from one form to another, with the aim of facilitating communication and understanding between individuals who come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As the primary agent of this process, the translator must pay close attention not only to the specific

strategies and techniques employed during the translation process, but also to "the ways in which their own identity as a translator is implicated within that process [19]".

##### 1) The characteristics of Morrison's Chinese translation of the Bible

At the beginning of Morrison's translation of the Bible, the British and Foreign Bible Society made clear demands of Robert Morrison: the translation should be faithful to the original text, understandable to the Chinese people, and earn their respect for the Bible. To ensure the "faithfulness" of the translation [20]. Morrison considered understanding the meaning of the Bible as his top priority. He used the Greek Textus Receptus and King James Version of the Bible as his translation blueprint, while also referencing multiple other translations, reflecting his identity as a "reader".

During the translation process, Morrison strived to be close to the original text literally, particularly by using a large number of particles and pronouns. Here is an example of how Morrison translated the first verse of the Gospel of John:

Source Text:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God [21].

Translated text:

当始已有言而其言偕神、又其言为神 [22]。

Obviously, there is a word-by-word correspondence between the Chinese translation and the NKJV, closely adhering to the original text and striving for faithful representation as the author's identity.

Although "faithfulness" is the primary principle for translating the Bible, Morrison advocates that translators should exercise subjectivity in understanding the original text, emphasizing that the expression should conform to Chinese language habits. In addition, as the first Protestant missionary to translate the entire Bible into Chinese, Morrison started almost from scratch, and his set of biblical terminology was adopted by later translations, such as "天国" "兄弟" "罪" "福音" and so on. Breaking free from the constraints of language, he conveyed the content and cultural spirit of the original text, completing the transformation into the role of the "creator".

In order to coordinate the two requirements of making the Chinese understand and gain respect for the Bible, Morrison transformed into a researcher and conducted in-depth discussions on the Chinese writing style to be used. His diligent research also earned praise from many scholars, such as Mao [23] who believed that "Morrison's translation is smooth, easy to understand, and the language he used conforms to the way of the Chinese people speaking".

##### 2) The characteristics of Yan Fu's Chinese translation of the Bible

Yan Fu has set a precedent for independent Chinese translation of the Bible. Yan Fu's identity as a creator is vividly displayed in the process of translation. In the first four chapters of the Gospel of Mark, the Christian term "sin" appears multiple times. Unlike the translation in Morrison's version as "罪", Yan Fu translates it as "罪过", which more accurately interprets the alienation between humans and God. Additionally, Yan Fu fully exercised his subjectivity as a creator during the translation process by intentionally deleting or altering expressions that did not align with

traditional Chinese values. For instance, the parable of the “Matthew Effect” in the Bible, which conveys the concept of “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer,” is well-known. However, this conflicts with the traditional Chinese values of “equality” and “fairness.” As a defender of traditional Chinese values, Yan Fu chose to delete or not translate related passages. This has caused some people to question the “faithfulness” of Yan Fu’s translation to the original text.

When translating “fishermen of people,” Morrison used the common occupational title “漁人者”, which is undoubtedly confusing. Yan Fu, on the other hand, created the new term “人漁” to refer to this concept. He was probably inspired by the study of the appellation for kings and political leaders as “shepherds of people” in the book of Mencius, and borrowed the structure of the Confucian term “人牧” to describe Jesus’ role as a “fishermen of people”. This improved the acceptability of the Bible to Chinese readers.

In the translation of specific theological terms, Yan Fu followed the tradition of the Church’s Chinese translation and referred to other Chinese versions, using the key terms such as “Gospel” “Holy Spirit” and “Sabbath” translated as “福音” “圣灵” and “安息日” respectively, respecting the original text so that the meaning of the translation is consistent with the original. As for whether Yan Fu put in effort to be a “reader”, one can know the answer from the reaction received by the British and Foreign Bible Society upon receiving Yan Fu’s translation—until the Revolution of 1911, the British and Foreign Bible Society was still waiting for the uncompleted manuscript by Yan Fu.

## V. CONCLUSION

In different cultural background, the Chinese translations of the Bible by two translators, Robert Morrison and Yan Fu, embody the characteristics of “unity in diversity”. On the one hand, both translators played four roles of “reader”, “author”, “creator”, and “researcher” throughout the translation process. Morrison’s “fidelity, perspicuity, and simplicity [24]” and Yan Fu’s “faithfulness, clarity, and elegance” also share a similar principle. On the other hand, while Morrison “strived for fidelity, clarity, and elegance in his translation [25]”. Yan Fu’s translation attracted Chinese scholars for its use of difficult and obscure words. Furthermore, Yan Fu’s translation emphasized the individual style and literary qualities, thus diluting the religious elements. It was also from Yan Fu’s translation of Bible passages that a literary trend emerged in Chinese translations of the Bible.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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