



A Comparative Analysis of Chinese Versions of *On the Road* based on Retranslation

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Abstract

Translation practice is closely related to language development and social advances. The change in all aspects of society will promote translation activity. In addition, some translation texts need to be renewed especially in literary translation, due to social progress, and readers' demands. Therefore, many scholars around the world turn to retranslation and its hypothesis and give their definitions or express their views. The book, *On the Road*, written by Jack Kerouac and published in 1957, is one of the representative works of America in the 1950s, primarily reflecting the condition of the Beat Generation. After its publication, three Chinese versions of the early period in China emerged and the translators are: Chu'an Wen (Wen's version, 1998), Yongnian Wang (Wang's version, 2006), and Yueqing Tao and Xiaoli He (1990 version). In 2020, the works of Jack Kerouac entered into the public domain. Therefore, a couple of translation versions emerged, such as Xianghui Yao's version, Ang Wu's version and Wei Yang's version. This paper analyzes the four Chinese versions (respectively Tao and He's version, Yao's and Wu's and Yang's versions) from different dimensions in order to examine certain scholars' opinions on the phenomenon of retranslation.

Keywords: Translation activity, retranslation, comparative analysis, *On the Road*, literary translation

1. Introduction

On the Road was written by Jack Kerouac and published in 1957 by Viking Press. It was primarily autobiographical, originating from Jack Kerouac's experience of traversing the continental United States. This book describes the two main protagonists' behaviors on the road to Mexico, showing their spirits of taking adventure and seeking freedom, also reflecting spiritual emptiness of American youngsters after World War II. Their lifestyle exerted considerable influence on American youngsters in 1960s. Arguably, among Jack Kerouac's books, *On the Road* is the most representative work, which is recognized by *Les cent livres du siècle*. It is regarded as a classic by hippie movement around 1960s, albeit this book enjoys mixed reviews after its publication. In addition to the different evaluations, this novel is not compact in structure and is partly characterized by a stream of consciousness. Moreover, behind the social influence it brought and the recognition from the public, it went through an arduous process of publication. Kong's essay (2020) shows the turn of acceptance of mainstream culture at that time, which explains that *On the Road* takes six years from its draft to final publication. Kong expresses that this novel realizes the metamorphosis from folk literature to classic literature due to the active engagement of each party, involving academic study, and the press, among other things.

With its growing influence, the first Chinese version of cover-to-cover translation was published by Lijiang Publishing Limited in 1990, with Tao and He as its translators. And then, Wen's translated version was published in 1998. Wang's version, published in 2006 by Shanghai Translation Publishing House, had dominated the whole market for more than ten years. However, the year 2020 witnessed many new translated versions. Among those, Jie Chen's version, published by Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House, received much attention. There are other versions: Yao's version published by Phoenix Publishing & Media Group, Yingyi He's version published by Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House, as well as Wu's version, Yang's version. The translated versions spring up like mushrooms, but here a research focus will place on just four versions.

2. Retranslation

2.1 Previous studies of Retranslation Outside China

According to Shuttleworth and Cowie (2014), the term "retranslation" is another name for "indirect translation", which means the translation process is conducted through intermediate translation relying on another language rather than the source language.

In Susam-Sarajeva's opinion (2006), there are some points about retranslation: not only the literary and canonical ones but also many other types of texts can be retranslated; the action of retranslation is not necessarily caused by the outdated translation versions or different times; retranslation will emerge when the current translations are flawed, assimilative, literal, or when the readers of target language shift their thoughts, or when a struggle for a local discourse that contains those

translation versions is conducted; retranslation consider more on the demands and views of the receiving system than the intrinsic characteristics of the source text.

Arguably, Susam-Sarajeva provides a fuller explanation for the retranslation phenomenon, introducing the retranslation of other texts into people's horizons and bringing further consideration for its reasons.

2.2 Previous studies of retranslation in China

As for the studies in China, many scholars discuss the difficulty of retranslation and discuss the relationship between the first translated version and the subsequent versions, and explore a way for the new translated versions to reach a higher level based on the existing achievement earned by the first version or the old ones. The following scholars primarily explore retranslation from the theoretical perspective and generalize the important issues in this field. Their conclusions provide the theoretical basis for the subsequent studies, including this paper. In contrast, this paper places emphasis on the research of specific cases and test some scholars' studies to some degree.

Luo (1995) points out that retranslation is a phenomenon with the development of translation practice and is indispensable for promoting the translation field to some extent. Luo thinks retranslation is inevitable, and the purpose is to seek better translation versions while respecting the old translations.

Luo (1991) refers to the first translation and the retranslated versions: the retranslated versions need to avoid repeated expressions of the first translation. Otherwise, the retranslations will suffer the suspicion of plagiarizing.

Xu (1996) concludes that retranslation have two meanings: one is that someone retranslates the works he or she has already translated. Another is that someone retranslates the works other scholars or translators has already translated. Xu also thinks that literary translation, especially literary retranslation, should utilize the advantages of the target language and adopt the best expressions in receiving system.

Gu (2003) puts forward retranslation on filtered translational accumulation, which means that the translated versions should reasonably employ all the old translations, absorb the quintessence, and infuse new better expressions. In this way, a translation version that is the closest to the original text will be produced.

Above Studies refer to the attitude to the first translated version or the past versions: respecting and absorbing their quintessence. Some studies continue to refine the concept of retranslation, and others, like Gu's research, contribute to its theoretical innovation.

2.3 Summarization

The studies of retranslation outside China explore the definition of retranslation and the texts it involves as well as its reasons. In contrast, the studies in China focus more on the retranslation process and its outcomes—different translated versions. Both of them contribute to flourishing retranslation.

3. Relevant studies about *On the Road*

3.1 Previous studies of *On the Road* outside China

The following studies primarily analyze *On the Road* from the perspectives of culture and literature. Little attention is drawn to its translation or retranslation. Under this circumstance, this paper intends to fill that gap.

Dougherty (2008) uses an ecological perspective to read this novel under the context of the increase of automobiles and more reliance on fuel in America and discusses the vision of driving on the road from the protagonist Sal's view. Ireland (2009) studied the relationship between the works of road genre and American history and culture. *On the Road* is one of the cases to be analyzed. *Salles et al.* (2018) explore the existential curiosity in the face of unexpected events and scenes based on phenomenology.

Savio (2019) analyzes how the authors embody their experience of World War II in their works and takes the two novels Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* as the examples and explores the determinant forming the novels. Morrison (2020) explores *The Canterbury Tales* and *On the Road* from the perspective of Pilgrimage Ecopoetics and points out that Geoffrey Chaucer's *Tales* exert influence on Jack Kerouac's writing of this novel.

To sum up, *Dougherty*' research is a unique perspective for the study of *On the Road*, for this book itself has literary solid color. While Savio and Morrison explore this novel with another work employing one typical character or research perspective and understand the links between works or the works with American society. *Salles et al.* notice the novel's content, while Ireland regards it as one subject together with other similar subjects to analyze his research topic. From the

analysis of Savio and Morrison, respectively, in 2019 and 2020, a research trend of *On the Road* may combine it with another novel or other works to discuss common problems.

3.2 Previous Studies of *On the Road* in China

The following studies involve the literary perspective and the perspective of translation. However, they lack the analysis from the perspective of retranslation. Furthermore, this paper provides two dimensions: synchronic analysis and diachronic analysis, and introduces new translated versions into study, which enriches the research of this novel.

He (2003) explores the writing style of *Tropic of Cancer* and *On the Road* and points out three characters: the first-person narrative approach to describe the life and ideas of “the lost generation” and “the beat generation”, the expression of anti-traditional culture and the shape of anti-hero character, spontaneous motivation and creative method. Jiang and Yu (2010) discuss the impact of wars on American people, in particular their mental world, through the analysis of Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* and find that there are something similar between “the lost generation” and “the beat generation”: traumatized by the wars and seeking for new values. Jin (2012) analyzes the marginal people in *On the Road*, *Rabbit Run*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*. It shows those people’s inability to integrate themselves into the society at that time and their rebellion. Su (2013) discusses the significance of Route 66 for American culture and people, combines the context of the novel *On the Road* and further reflects the spirits of the westward process through Route 66. Li (2015) explores the translator’s subjectivity through Wen’s version and Wang’s version and discusses the nuances of the two versions caused by translators’ different opinions. Han (2016) analyzes the different Chinese versions from three phases: in 1980s and 1990s, at the turn of the century, in the early 21st century, and shows the main characters of various translated versions. Han (2017) uses the two novels of Jack Kerouac to explore the betweenness of the author himself. He shows the contradictions between seeking freedom and stability in *On the Road*, and between the breakthroughs and conservatism in *The Dharma Bums*. Jin (2018), based on Gadamer’s prejudices theory, analyzes the two translated versions of *On the Road*, respectively Yushi Huang and Xianrong Shi’s 1962 version and Wang’s 2006 version, from the perspective of language, cultural context, and economic climate.

To sum up, many scholars in China make a comparison or find similar characters between this novel and other works, no matter what perspectives they explore. In addition, some analyze the translated versions of this novel, mainly two versions to compare.

Studies about this novel both at abroad and home may contain literary elements, such as highway culture, the characters’ analysis, value seeking, and dimension of translation, such as the comparison between two versions, and its translation and communication in China. Furthermore, many studies utilize comparisons between translated versions or different works.

Through the review of this novel, the author finds there is no research on retranslation about this novel. Moreover, less attention to the new translated versions after 2020 is paid. Therefore, the author decides to study Chinese versions from the perspective of retranslation and discusses the value of retranslation in this novel.

4. Comparative Analysis of the Chinese Versions

4.1 The Comparison among three versions published in 2020

4.1.1 Basic Introduction of the three versions

The author chooses Wu’s version, Yao’s version, and Yang’s version, all of which were published in 2020. They are distributed by CITIC Press Group, Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing House, Yunnan People’s Publishing House separately.

4.1.2 Specific analysis in diction

Arguably, “Diction” refers to an activity that when people want to express something or translate one language into another, people will choose an appropriate expression under corresponding context.

The author extracts some examples from the translated versions. All of examples use various expression on words of the source text, showcasing translators’ consideration on diction.

Translation Example 1.

Source text: I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won’t bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up.....

Target text by Yao: 我和妻子分手不久后，第一次见到了迪恩。那会儿我刚从重病中恢复过来，至于生病我懒得多说什么，总之和我们令人疲惫的可悲的分手有关…… (wǒ hé qī zǐ fēn shǒu bù jiǔ hòu, dì yī cì

jiàn dào le dí ēn. nà huì ér wǒ gāng cóng zhòng bìng zhōng huī fù guò lái, zhì yú shēng bìng wǒ lǎn de duō shuō shén me, zǒng zhī hé wǒ men líng rén pí bèi de kě bēi de fēn shǒu yǒu guān.....)

Target text by Wu: 我头回遇到迪安是在我和我老婆散伙之后不久，那时我病了一场，但这场病我也不想再提及了，生病确实与那场悲催、令人疲倦的离婚有关……(wǒ tóu huí yù dào dí ān shì zài wǒ hé wǒ lǎo pō sǎn huǒ zhī hòu bù jiǔ, nà shí wǒ bìng le yī chǎng, dàn zhè chǎng bìng wǒ yě bù xiǎng zài tí jí le, shēng bìng què shí yǔ nà chǎng bēi cuī, lìng rén pí bèi de lí hūn yǒu guān.....)

Target text by Yang: 第一次遇到迪恩，是我和妻子离婚后不久。我刚经历了一场大病，具体情况也懒得多说了，反正肯定跟那场叫人心力交瘁的分手和我的情绪脱不了关系……(dì yī cì yù dào dí ēn, shì wǒ hé qī zǐ lí hūn hòu bù jiǔ. wǒ gāng jīng lì le yī chǎng dà bìng, jù tǐ qíng kuàng yě lǎn de duō shuō le, fǎn zhèng kěn dìng gēn nà chǎng jiào rén xīn lì jiāo cuī de fēn shǒu hé wǒ de qíng xù tuō bù liǎo guān xi.....)

“Split up” is translated as “fēn shǒu/分手”, which means “break up” in Yao’s text, “lí hūn/离婚” which means “get divorced” in Yang’s text, “sàn huǒ/散伙” which means “end a relationship” in Wu’s text. However, when “split-up” appears for the second time, only Yao handles it with the first expression “fēn shǒu”, while Yang changes it from “lí hūn” to “fēn shǒu”, Wu adjusts it from “sàn huǒ” to “lí hūn”. Considering the original text, “I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up”, the word “wife” in Chinese means a title for a woman who gets married, so for Chinese readers, the words “split up” means that the marriage between “I” and “my wife” is dissolved. The three translations introduce three different words to express that situation.

Translation Example 2.

Source text: One day I was hanging around the campus and Chad and Tim Gray told me Dean was staying in a cold-water pad in East Harlem, the Spanish Harlem.

Target text by Yao: 一天我在校园里闲逛，查德和蒂姆·格雷告诉我迪恩住进了东哈莱姆区——一套只供应冷水的廉价公寓。(yī tiān wǒ zài xiào yuán lǐ xián guàng, chá dé hé dì mǔ gé léi gào sù wǒ shuō dí ēn zhù jìn le dōng hā lái mǔ qū--yī tào zhǐ gōng yìng lěng shuǐ de lián jià gōng yù.)

Target text by Wu: 有一天，我正在校园里闲逛，查德和蒂姆·格雷跟我说迪安住在东哈莱姆的一所冬天不带暖气的破公寓里，西班牙语区的哈莱姆。(yǒu yī tiān, wǒ zhèng zài xiào yuán lǐ xián guàng, chá dé hé dì mǔ gé léi gēn wǒ shuō dí ān zhù zài dōng hā lái mǔ de yī suǒ dōng tiān bù dài nuǎn qì de pò gōng yù lǐ, xī bān yá yǔ qū de hā lái mǔ.)

Target text by Yang: 一天，我正在学校里晃悠，查德和蒂姆·格雷告诉我，狄恩就在东哈莱姆区，也就是所谓西班牙哈莱姆区的一片贫民窟里。(yī tiān, wǒ zhèng zài xué xiào lǐ huàng yōu, chá dé hé dì mǔ gé léi gào sù wǒ, dí ēn jiù zài dōng hā lái mǔ qū, yě jiù shì suǒ wèi xī bān yá hā lái mǔ qū de yī piàn pín mǐn kū lǐ.)

“Cold-water pad” is translated as “lěng shuǐ gōng yù/冷水公寓”, indicating that “the pad only supplies cold water” in Yao’s version, and as “dōng tiān bù dài nuǎn qì de pò gōng yù/冬天不带暖气的破公寓”, meaning that “the pad lacks the heating facilities” in Wu’s version. In comparison, Yang renders it as the meaning of “slum”, in Chinese “pín mǐn kū/贫民窟”.

Yao’s version is arguably literal translation. Throughout the context, it is unnecessary to emphasize the supply of water in the pad, and there are no relevant plots revolving around “cold water” or “hot water”. Wu’s version mentioned above belongs to liberal translation to some degree. It strips the literal meaning off, changes the meaning into an acceptable expression and presents a pad with poor facilities. This will not cause distortion of the main idea of this novel. Likewise, Yang utilizes free translation. “Cold-water pad” is translated into three versions.

Translation Example 3.

Source text: And this was really the way that my whole road experience began, and the things that were to come are too fantastic not to tell.

Target text by Yao: 我的整个路上生涯也确实就是这么开始的，即将发生的事情神奇得难以描述。(wǒ de zhěng gè lù shàng shēng yá yě què shí jiù shì zhè me kāi shǐ de, jí jiāng fā shēng de shì qíng shén qí de nán yǐ miáo shù.)

Target text by Wu: 我后来整个“在路上”的生涯就是这么开始的，之后发生的一切简直匪夷所思。(wǒ hòu lái zhěng gè ‘zài lù shàng’ de shēng yá jiù shì zhè me kāi shǐ de, zhī hòu fā shēng de yī qiè jiǎn zhí fěi yí suǒ sī.)

Target text by Yang: 这条路后来真的成了我整个“在路上”历程的开端，之后发生的事奇妙到不可思议，简直无法言说。(zhè tiáo lù hòu lái zhēn de chéng le wǒ zhěng gè ‘zài lù shàng’ lì chéng de kāi duān, zhī hòu fā shēng de shì qí miào dào bù kě sī yì, jiǎn zhí wú fǎ yán shuō.)

“Too fantastic not to tell” is translated by Yao and Yang through literal translation based on the English structure, with different Chinese characters. Wu deals with this situation by utilizing the Chinese four-character words “fěi yí suǒ sī /匪夷所思”, which means that “someone’s behaviors or something is too abnormal and weird to imagine by other ordinary people”. “Too fantastic not to tell” in the source text is to describe the subsequent experiences of the protagonists. Furthermore, the characters in the novel are on behalf of the Beat generation. The attitudes of challenging traditional values, contempt for social orders, and seeking for absolute freedom fill their minds. Under this circumstance, the three translations capture the original meaning and adopt various dictions to express the source text.

Above cases of study showcase various dictions regarding the original will be applied in diverse translations to avoid repetition.

4.1.3 Specific analysis in comprehension

“Berthoud Pass” emerges four times in the original text. Through the verification of Wikipedia, this word refers to mountains rather than a person. Therefore, the explanation of Yao’s version for “...reached clear to the top of Berthoud Pass...” is not appropriate because it is described as Ferdinand Berthoud, a French horologist. Yao misunderstands the context here. As for Yang and Wu, both provide the proper meaning of “Berthoud Pass”.

This shows that retranslations, even emerging at the same period, will correct or prevent misunderstanding of the source text and avoid flawed versions with the pursuit of adequate and better renderings.

4.2 *Yueqing Tao and Xiaoli He’s version and ang Wu’s version*

4.2.1 Basic introduction of the two versions

The publishing time of the selected two versions spans 30 years. Tao and He’s version (hereinafter referred to as Tao’s version), the first formal Chinese version, was published in 1990. Wu’s version with other new versions springs up in 2020.

4.2.2 Analysis of the language from lexical terms

This paper discusses the development of language from lexical terms. For example, regarding the appellation in the novel without particular signified, Tao’s version almost deals with them totally by the word “huǒ jì/伙计”, which refers to a term of endearment between males in some regions of Northern China. Through counting, “huǒ jì” appears 136 times in Tao’s translated version, and 7 times in Wu’s text. It proves that “huǒ jì” in China’s language development presents a declining tendency, though this word is not old-fashioned enough to be sifted out. Instead, Wu adopts “gē men/哥们”, which enjoys a similar function as “huǒ jì”, totaling 153 times. And this word “gē men” is a daily expression nowadays, following the current language usage.

4.2.3 Analysis on diction

This part is related to discussion on exact wording. The word “Blackie” in “Hey, Blackie” is translated as “zá zhǒng/杂种” in Tao’s version and into “lǎo hēi/老黑” in Wu’s version. In Chinese, “zá zhǒng” is foul language when connected with people. Nevertheless, the original text here includes no hostility, disparagement, or contempt, but a relaxed tone, a salutation. In this circumstance, “zá zhǒng” with its negative effect is unsuitable and may be misleading. Based on the attitude to black people from the whole text, no expression about black people is accompanied by distain. Therefore, Wu tackles “Blackie” in a simple manner to ensure a familiar oral expression in target language.

4.2.4 Analysis of Translation Errors

Translation errors may include the following types: obvious mistakes such as wrong translation of common sense, mistakes caused by misunderstanding, mistakes made due to limited recognition.

The following examples, to some extent, reflect the types of translation errors above. Some basic mistakes can be corrected immediately, others can be revised with meticulous consideration of the context. And some mistakes caused by limited recognition will be corrected with the development of recognition and the passage of time.

Translation Example 4

Source text: Missouri Pacific

Target text by Tao: 密苏里的大西洋 (mì sū lǐ de dà xī yáng)

Target text by Wu: 密苏里太平洋 (mì sū lǐ tài píng yáng)

Tao's version mixes up "Pacific" and "Atlantic" and changes the Chinese expression of "Pacific" as that of "Atlantic". In terms of this point, Wu provides the proper translation.

Translation Example 5.

Source text: "When you borrowed that nickel to make up the check for the chicken-fried steaks"

"No, man, the chili! Remember, the Texas Star?"

Target text by Tao: "当你借上几个子儿去买油煎鸡排。" ("dāng nǐ jiè shàng jǐ gè zǐ er qù mǎi yóu jiān jī pái.")

"不, 老兄, 真见鬼! 你还记得《得克萨斯星报》吗?" ("bù, lǎo xiōng, zhēn jiàn guǐ! nǐ hái jì de dé kè sà sī xīng bào ma?")

Target text by Wu: "那回你找我借了 5 美分, 好凑够买炸鸡排的钱。" ("nà huí nǐ zhǎo wǒ jiè le 5 měi fēn, hǎo còu gòu mǎi zhà jī pái de qián.")

"不, 哥们, 是辣子鸡! 你记得吗? 在得克萨斯之星。" ("bù, gē men, shì là zǐ jī! nǐ jì de ma? zài dé kè sà sī zhī xīng.")

"Texas Star" is understood as a newspaper in Yao's text and as a restaurant in Wu's version during the translation process. According to the context, with "chicken-fried steaks" and "chili" as reference information, Wu's understanding is more accurate, while Tao offers a not coherent version of those sentence expressions.

There are some other examples like "Columbus, so long". Tao's version does not understand the meaning in the original text, thereby giving an irrelevant translated text. However, Wu realizes a perfect link with the previous information: the two high-school boys who say "Columbus, so long" are from Columbus, Ohio, and plan to hitch around the United States in the summer. Above information fathoms out what the source wants to express: two boys have stayed Columbus for a long time and say goodbye to this place to start their journey. Under this circumstance, Wu's version presents a flawless one.

"Chevy" is another name for "Chevrolet". Cars of the brand "Chevrolet" were introduced into China's market in 2005. Due to the early publication in 1990, "Chevy" may be a new word or a specific translation about it was not determined. Tao's version does not translate it as "xuě fú lán/雪佛兰" in Chinese, while Wu revises this point.

In short, from the perspectives of language development, diction, errors correction, Wu's version provides better expressions than Tao's.

5. Conclusion

The comparison among the three versions shows that the translated versions published in a same period would choose various vocabularies and adopt different translation methods to accomplish the target text without many similarities while ensuring a relatively excellent translation. Through the analysis, all translated versions show evident signs to avoid repetition. The comparison between the old version and the new version demonstrates that 30 years is not enough to witness significant differences in language, especially in literary expression and that the new translation truly makes strides and seeks a better translation. Based on the discussion of the above cases, this paper proves that 1) retractions indeed avoid repetition with existing translations, 2) the reason of retranslation include that the previous versions are flawed and there is a need to seek better ones.

Certainly, there exist some limits to this paper. Five new translation versions were produced and published in 2020. Due to limited time, the author only chooses three of them. Some new examples or research perspectives may exist in other versions, which may be discussed in future papers. Meanwhile, other scholars may explore the other texts from the comparative analysis or just a single one.

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