

# A Survey of Features of Three English Versions of Lu Xun's Short Stories

GUO Yu

Leshan Normal University, Leshan, China

Lu Xun (1881-1936) has been acclaimed father of modern Chinese literature. He is the first writer to use the vernacular to write fiction. His stories have laid a solid foundation for the development of modern Chinese fiction. *Call to Arms* (1923) and *Wandering* (1926) represent the greatest achievement of Chinese story-writing at that time. Since the 1920's, Lu Xun's stories have been translated into various languages and published throughout the world, enjoying an international reputation. The three English versions chosen are different with various features, especially in dealing with Chinese traditional culture according to different purposes and towards different English readers.

*Keywords:* Lu Xun's short stories, Wang's version, the Yangs' version, Lyell's version

## Introduction

Lu Xun (1881-1936) has been acclaimed father of modern Chinese literature. He is the first writer to use the vernacular to write fiction. In his short stories, he exposes the crimes of feudalism, describes the plight of the peasants, and also depicts the fate of the intellectuals who struggle in the intense social contradictions. His fiction has laid a solid foundation for the development of modern Chinese fiction. There are totally 33 stories in Lu Xun's works, most of which are short stories. *Call to Arms* (呐喊) is comprised of 14 stories, written between 1918 and 1922. *Wandering* (彷徨) composes 11 stories, written between 1924 and 1925. These two books represent the greatest achievement of Chinese fiction creation at that time. Since they were published, Lu Xun's stories have been translated into various languages all over the world, and enjoyed an international reputation. Among them, three English versions are of significance and of influence in that they make these stories known to English readers, that is, Chi-chen Wang's version, the Yangs' version, and William A. Lyell's version.

## Wang's Version

*Ah Q and Others: Selected Stories of Lusin* was translated by the famous translator Chi-chen Wang, and published by Columbia University Press in 1941, and reprinted by Greenwood Press in 1971. There are only 11 stories included in Wang's version, namely, "My Native Heath", "The Cake of Soap", "The Divorce", "Reunion in a Restaurant", "The Story of Hair", "Cloud over Luchen", "Our Story of Ah Q", "A Hermit at Large", "Remorse", "The Window", and "The Diary of a Madman". Wang's version is the first influential English version of Lu Xun's stories, for it is addressed to those whose real interest lies in humanism instead of time-killing literature and who would welcome Lu Xun as a symbol of China's awakening. Therefore, Wang has adopted American English in his translating, especially colloquial language in dialogues, which are very familiar to

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GUO Yu, M.A., lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Leshan Normal University, Leshan, China.

average Americans. In this version, there is an introduction in which Wang provides readers with a lot of information, including his evaluation of the author and his fiction, a brief introduction to all his life, the literary and historical status of his longest story, *The True Story of Ah Q*, the translator's target readers and difficulties, as well as other English versions available. Generally speaking, when dealing with culture-loaded messages, Wang adopts either paraphrase method, omitting the original image, or foreignizing strategy, making target readers confused without necessary annotations. And he usually transliterates people's names and some proper names. For instance, “八卦拳” is just transliterated into “pa-kua-ch'üan”, and “光绪年间” is “the Kuang Hsu period” without any background information. Similarly, the highly Chinese culture-bound image of “承重孙” in “The Misanthrope” has been omitted by the translator, just translating it into “the chief mourner”. It is obvious that Wang's translation is not appropriate and likely to lead to ambiguity for target readers. Moreover, there are some omission, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation in this version, in particular, in the translation of *The True Story of Ah Q*. For example, Wang has translated the term “遗老” into “a man who has seen better days”.

### The Yangs' Version

The well-known husband-and-wife translators Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang translated *The True Story of Ah Q*, published by Beijing Foreign Languages Press in 1953; then *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun*, published by the same press respectively in 1954, 1960, 1972, and 2002. Next came the magnificent four-volume *Selected Works of Lu Hsun* (1956-1960) by them, the first attempt at a systematic introduction to Lu Xun in English. Moreover, the Yangs also translated Lu Xun's first two collections of stories, entitled *Call to Arms* and *Wandering*, in 1981. It is noticeable that most translated versions in different languages all over the world are mainly based on the Yangs' version by Foreign Language Press (FLP).

The Yangs have always been celebrated for their good command of both Chinese and English, precise and fluent translation as well as perfect cooperation, so as to be chosen to translate all of Lu Xun's works into English by FLP. On the whole, their version is characterized by their smooth British English, idiomatic expressions, and loyalty to the original, although there are still some misunderstanding and omission in 1954 version. But most of these flaws have been corrected and improved in 1960 version. Besides, the Yangs' version does not convey enough unique cultural messages and relevant information, which are attractive to average readers, resulting in cultural loss in communication. And stories included in the Yangs' versions are not always the same, according to different requirements and different historical periods. Generally speaking, the Yangs' version is more target-culture oriented.

### Lyell's Version

*Diary of a Madman and Other Stories* was translated in 1990 by William A. Lyell, the professor of Chinese Language and Literature of Stanford University. This version has included all of stories in *Call to Arms* and *Wandering*. There are also a full and accurate introduction and a note on Chinese pronunciation. Since the Yangs have systematically translated Lu Xun's stories into a British English, Lyell is the first to translate all of these stories into the American branch of the language. Lyell's version is a completed version of Lu Xun's prominent collections of stories, and also the first English version by an American translator to comprehensively and systematically introduce the writer and his fiction to the English world. The translator has done much research on the original text in detail before translating, and gives us a preface and an introduction, which contains the

author's biography, his writing career, in particular, his short stories, and the translating process as well as difficulties. What's more important, Lyell has been interested in traditional Chinese culture for a long time, thought highly of those Chinese culture-loaded messages in Lu Xun's stories, and tried every means to reproduce them in the target text instead of omitting or destroying them, which is difficult of attainment. Hence, a good many notes and explanations are found in Lyell's version whenever any cultural misunderstanding or obstacle is likely to arise, and sometimes annotations occupy one third to half of the space in some pages. The last but not the least, Lyell has chosen 16 pieces of illustrations by the modern Chinese artist Cheng Shifa (1921-2007) for *Ah Q—The Real Story*, from which English readers, especially those who know little about China and Chinese people at that time, could be made upon a direct and deep impression.

In the first place, it contains detailed annotations to explain when and where each story was originally published. For instance, Lu Xun's first story is translated by Lyell into "Remembrances of the Past" with an elaborate annotation. Through the explanation, readers get to know not only the information about the original text, but also the differences between its first English translation and the present one. This kind of annotation makes for a thorough and systematic comprehension of the writer's story writing and publication as a whole.

In the second place, Lyell speaks of the relevant English versions of some Chinese literary classics when necessary. It is beneficial for English readers to acquaint themselves with Chinese literature, both past and present. A case in point is his reference to *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

In the third place, the translator also introduces the prototypes of some protagonists in Lu Xun's stories, in order to make readers know that the writings have originated, for the most part, from the writer's real life and surroundings, such as his introduction to the character of Wei Lianshu, the protagonist in "The Loner", is introduced as being "in part, based on Lu Xun's friend Fan Ailong". Lyell even gives an annotation to explain the character and fate of Wei's grandmother, which helps to understand Lu Xun's sympathetic attitude toward Chinese women, although she is just a minor role in the same story. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to say that the translator has made first-hand investigation before translating, and he has tried every means to make a desirable translation.

In the fourth place, Lyell is good at relating one story with another to make a systematic impression upon readers. For instance, the superstitious belief, that is, "a steamed bread roll in one's blood" could be used to cure certain illness, has been repeated in two stories: One is "Diary of a Madman" and the other is "Medicine". Lyell gives a note to make readers ponder it over as a whole: "A similar incident is the basis for Lu Xun's story 'Medicine'. Human blood was believed to be a cure for tuberculosis". Besides, the translator usually associates some of stories, at least their main threads, with Lu Xun's personal experiences. For instance, in the story of "The Loner", there is a sentence to describe what circumstance Wei Lianshu was in after his father's death: "我父亲死去之后, 因为夺我的屋子, 要我在笔据上画花押". Lyell also deems that it reflects some part of the author's real life: "Lu Xun's brother, Zhou Zuoren, said that Lu Xun once used these very words to describe how his own great uncle tried to cheat him of the family property in Shaoxing when their father died in 1897". It proves that great work of art usually roots in the real life.

### Conclusion

All in all, the Yangs' version is more target-culture oriented, while Wang's and Lyell's are, rather, source-culture oriented. The three English versions have their own merits and demerits, but from the point of conveying

cultural messages, Lyell's version is no doubt the most successful one, for it not only tries every means to be faithful to the source text and retains the exoticism of the source text, but also reproduces cultural connotations in the target text and provides a lot of information to explain their background. In conclusion, in virtue of Lyell's earnest attitude, great efforts, and excellent translation, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories* has been designated as the required text of modern Chinese literature in many American universities.

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