A Study On Translator's Subjectivity From The Perspective Of Multidimensional Transformations: A Case Analysis Of Two Chinese Versions Of The Bible

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the Mandarin Union Version and the Modern Chinese Version of the Bible, using the theory of multidimensional transformations in Eco-translatology to conduct an in-depth exploration of translator's subjectivity, with the King James Version (KJV) serving as the primary source text. Eco-translatology constructs a new paradigm for translation activities, with its core elements including the complexity of the translational eco-environment, the prominent central role of the translator, the crucial mechanism of adaptation and selection, and the transformation paths across multiple dimensions. In analyzing the two Chinese versions of the Bible, the study reveals that in the linguistic dimension, the Mandarin Union Version and the Modern Chinese Version adopt different strategies in response to structural differences between the source and target languages, such as word order adjustment and grammatical conversion. In the cultural dimension, the two versions differ in their handling of culturally loaded terms and religious allusions such as "wise men," each emphasizing different aspects. In the communicative dimension, the versions show distinct approaches in constructing logical relationships and conveying semantic and pragmatic meaning. Through comparative analysis, the paper clearly demonstrates how translator's subjectivity is exercised across different dimensions, driven by factors such as source culture and target readership. Within the process of adapting to the translational eco-environment, translators make diverse choices that effectively promote the cross-linguistic transmission and intercultural understanding of biblical culture.

Keywords: *Eco-translatology; multidimensional transformations; translator's subjectivity; Chinese Bible versions; cross-cultural communication*

I. Introduction

The rise of Eco-translatology has opened new avenues for studying translator's subjectivity within the diverse landscape of translation research. Scholars have pointed out that Eco-translatology offers a systematic and innovative framework for analyzing translation activities (Hu Gengshen, 2010). Religious classics play a vital role in cultural exchange, and the history of translation of *Bible* into Chinese vividly reflects the deep interaction between Chinese and Western cultures. From the earliest translation efforts by Nestorian missionaries during the Tang Dynasty to the present day, the Chinese translation of the *Bible* spans over a millennium, marked by the

emergence and evolution of various versions (Su Rui et al., 2014). Although translation efforts faced setbacks during the Yuan and Ming dynasties, the 19th century witnessed a surge in translation of *Bible* driven by Protestant missionaries, with the Mandarin Union Version becoming a canonical text. In modern times, the emergence of the Modern Chinese Version further enriched the translation landscape. Given this rich history and diverse translational ecology, this paper selects the Mandarin Union Version and the Modern Chinese Version as representative cases. Using the framework of multidimensional transformations in Eco-translatology, it aims to uncover how translators exercise subjectivity across the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. The goal is to analyze the strategic differences in how translators adapt to complex translational eco-environments across different historical periods. This study offers valuable insights for religious text translation, enhances mutual understanding in cross-cultural religious communication, and expands the depth and scope of Eco-translatology in the study of classical texts—contributing to the ongoing innovation and development of translation studies.

II.   The Translation Of *Bible* In China

The cultural exchange between Christianity and Chinese civilization has a long history, and the translation of the *Bible* into Chinese is a significant part of this process (Jian, 2006). During the Tang Dynasty, the Nestorian Church (Jingjiao) was introduced into China, initiating the earliest efforts to translate the Bible. Missionaries such as Alopen attempted translation, often using compilation and adaptation methods due to limited linguistic proficiency and cultural exchange. For example, "God" was translated as "Tianzun," and phonetic transliterations like "Alohe" were used. However, the suppression of Buddhism under Emperor Wuzong led to setbacks for Jingjiao, and many early translation efforts were lost.

Western missionaries faced similar cultural and religious challenges during their missionary and translation activities in colonial contexts (Dollerup, 2010). In the history of translation of *Bible* into Chinese, the translation of terms such as "God" highlighted the clash of cultural concepts and sparked long-standing debates that significantly influenced translation strategies. These naming controversies became key phenomena in cultural exchange.

Although Christianity was present during the Yuan Dynasty, there is little evidence of translation of *Bible*. Some cultural and religious exchange likely occurred, but no significant translation achievements were recorded. In the late Ming and early Qing periods, following the European Reformation, missionaries such as Matteo Ricci came to China and promoted Christianity through cultural exchange. Their writings involved the translation of Christian concepts, integrating Western ideas with Chinese traditions. Terms like "Tianzhu" and "Shangdi" were used to correspond with "God," and partial translations such as the Pauthier version laid the groundwork for future efforts.

In the 19th century, Protestant missionaries led a wave of translation of *Bible*. Robert Morrison initiated the Protestant translation movement in China, followed by numerous translators producing versions such as the Gützlaff and Delegates' Versions. The debate over translating "God" intensified, resulting in multiple versions coexisting and reflecting the cultural divergence between Christianity and Chinese traditions.

Toward the end of the 19th century, missionaries sought to unify translations, leading to the publication of the Mandarin Union Version—a landmark achievement. This version synthesized the expertise of Chinese and Western translators, balancing colloquialism, readability, and fidelity to the original text. It contributed to the development of vernacular Chinese and became a classic in Chinese *Bible* translation.

From the 20th century onward, Chinese clergy and lay scholars became the main force in translation of *Bible*. Versions such as the Studium Biblicum Version and Lü Zhenzhong's translation emerged, offering diverse perspectives and meeting varied needs. These developments reflect the evolving nature of translation of *Bible* and

the dynamic interplay of cultural exchange across different historical periods.

The history of Bible translation in China is a vivid microcosm of Sino-Western cultural interaction and provides a rich ecological sample for translation studies. Translators across different eras have explored various approaches under diverse contexts, facilitating the cross-linguistic transmission of religious culture and underscoring the importance of translator's subjectivity in navigating complex eco-environments. Based on this, the present study selects the Mandarin Union Version and a modern Chinese translation, applying the perspective of multidimensional transformations in Eco-translatology to examine how translators exert their subjectivity across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions, and to analyze the transformation strategies and internal logic of different historical versions.

III.   Source Text And The Two Chinese Versions

This study uses the King James Version (KJV), published in 1611 under the patronage of King James I of England, as the source text. Renowned for its fidelity to the original, elegant language, and accessible style, the KJV has profoundly influenced English literature and language, serving as a reference for many subsequent translations. It has circulated widely in the English-speaking world for centuries and laid the foundation for modern English.

The Mandarin Union Version is a milestone in the history of Chinese *Bible* translation. Its production spanned nearly three decades and involved numerous missionaries and Chinese assistants, forming a complex translational community that laid the foundation for the version's development (Xu Xiaojun, 2018). The two chief editors, Calvin Wilson Mateer and Frederick William Baller, had strong command of Chinese. Mateer advocated for sinicization and improved punctuation, while Baller emphasized harmonizing the original with Chinese, promoting colloquial style, national comprehensibility, elegant simplicity, fidelity to the original, and literal translation of metaphors (Xie Tianzhen, 2009). The version's elegant language and readability quickly made it the dominant translation, contributing to the vernacular movement and influencing modern Chinese literature. It is widely recognized as a masterpiece of Chinese *Bible* translation.

The Modern Chinese Version, published in 1979, was based on the 1976 Modern English Version. The translation team included Chinese scholars and pastors such as Professor Xu Mushi, Dr. Luo Weiren, Dr. Zhou Lianhua, Dr. Wang Chengzhang, and Ms. Jiao Ming. Following Eugene Nida's principle of "dynamic equivalence," the team prioritized clarity and accessibility for modern readers. The translation aimed to meet both listening and reading needs, using contemporary Chinese to ensure that believers could easily understand the text (Xie Tianzhen, 2009). This version effectively conveys biblical meaning in modern Chinese, aligns with contemporary reading habits, and is widely used among Chinese Christian communities. It plays an important role in promoting the understanding and dissemination of the *Bible* in modern society.

IV.   Theoretical Framework

Core Concepts of Eco-translatology

Eco-translatology emerged in the early 21st century in response to global ecological thought, traditional Chinese ecological wisdom, interdisciplinary development, and the translation community's exploration of ecological approaches to translation (Hu Gengshen, 2010). It provides a new paradigm for translation studies by examining translation from an ecological perspective.

The theory emphasizes the translational eco-environment, which encompasses natural, economic, linguistic, cultural, and socio-political factors closely linked to translation activities (Hu Gengshen et al., 2016). In the long history of translation of *Bible*, these factors have intertwined to form a highly complex eco-environment. For instance, during the Tang Dynasty, the cultural and religious exchange environment

significantly influenced translation activities, while in the 19th century, the socio-historical context became a key factor that translators had to adapt to.

The translational eco-environment is a dynamic and complex system involving the source text, source and target languages, and the worlds they represent. It includes linguistic, communicative, cultural, and social elements, as well as interactions among authors, readers, and commissioners. For example, when translating literary classics, the cultural background of the work, the author's intent, and the expectations of the target audience all shape the eco-environment that the translator must adapt to.

Within this environment, the concept of "translator-centeredness" highlights the translator's pivotal role. The translator acts as a key node in the ecological system, adapting to environmental constraints while making informed choices based on professional expertise and subjective judgment (Hu Gengshen, 2011a). In poetry translation, for instance, the translator must grasp the original's imagery, rhythm, and cultural connotations, while selecting expressions that align with the aesthetic preferences of the target audience.

The mechanism of adaptation and selection is central to translation, involving continuous interaction between the translator and the eco-environment. Following the principle of "eliminating the weak and retaining the strong," the translator refines the translation through selective adaptation and adaptive selection (Hu Gengshen, 2004). In translating technical texts, for example, the translator must adapt to specialized terminology and complex syntax to ensure accurate and clear information delivery.

Multidimensional transformations provide practical pathways for translation, guiding the translator to adapt across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions (Hu Gengshen, 2011b). In translating tourism brochures, for instance, the linguistic dimension ensures fluent expression, the cultural dimension conveys local cultural features, and the communicative dimension engages readers—together optimizing the translation under ecological principles.

Translator's Subjectivity and Multidimensional Transformations

Translator's subjectivity is a key element in translation, closely linked to multidimensional transformations within Eco-translatology. It reflects the translator's initiative, creativity, and dominant role in the translation process (Zha Mingjian et al., 2003). Within the framework of Eco-translatology, the translator occupies a central position, engaging in selective adaptation and adaptive selection based on the translational eco-environment (Jun, 2020).

Multidimensional transformations—comprising the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions—offer a practical framework for analyzing translator's subjectivity. In the linguistic dimension, the translator adapts to the structural differences between source and target languages by adjusting word order and converting grammatical forms, demonstrating subjectivity through linguistic adaptation (Hu Gengshen, 2011b). In the cultural dimension, the translator's handling of culturally loaded terms and religious allusions reflects their understanding and negotiation between source and target cultures. For example, the translation of "wise men" reveals different approaches to conveying cultural meaning. In the communicative dimension, the translator must consider the communicative effectiveness of the translation within the target context, relying on accurate judgment of the audience's reception and expectations—another manifestation of translator's subjectivity.

By comparing the two versions of the *Bible*, this study reveals how translators exercise subjectivity while respecting the source text, adapting to different historical and cultural eco-environments. These insights offer valuable guidance for translation practice, elevate research on the translation of *Bible*, and promote effective cross-cultural communication and deeper understanding.

V. Case Analysis Of Translator's Subjectivity In Multidimensional Transformations

In Eco-translatology, the transformation in the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions emphasizes the translator's adaptive choices and selective adaptation during the translation process. Translator's subjectivity is reflected in the translator's initiative, creativity, and dominant role in translation activities. Translators must flexibly adjust linguistic forms, cultural expressions, and communicative strategies to ensure the translated text aligns with the target language norms and cultural expectations, thereby achieving ecological balance and optimization. This multidimensional transformation occurs at various levels and aims to enhance the readability, acceptability, and communicative effectiveness of the translation, allowing it to circulate naturally within the target language environment.

Transformation in Linguistic Dimension

The transformation in linguistic dimension in Eco-translatology emphasizes the translator's adaptive choices in linguistic form (Hu Gengshen, 2011c). Translators must respond to structural differences between the source and target languages by adjusting word order, converting grammatical categories, and modifying sentence structures to ensure the translation conforms to the linguistic habits of the target language. This transformation occurs at multiple levels and aims to enhance the readability and acceptability of the translation, allowing it to circulate naturally and fluently within the target language environment.

The English source text of the *Bible*, particularly the King James Version (KJV), contains complex sentence structures, including long sentences, intricate grammar, and distinctive vocabulary. The translator's strategies in the linguistic dimension—such as word order adjustment and voice conversion—directly affect the reader's comprehension of the text. Differences in how various versions handle these linguistic elements reflect the translator's adaptive intelligence and consideration of the target audience's preferences. Comparative analysis helps reveal the strengths and weaknesses of each version and highlights the translator's subjective agency.

Example 1

KJV: "When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was." (Matthew 2:9)

Mandarin Union Version: "他们听见王的话就去了。在东方所看见的那星，忽然在他们前头行，直行到小孩子的地方，就在上头停住了。"

Modern Chinese Version: "听见了这话，他们就离开走了。这时候，他们在东方看见的那颗星又出现，并且在前头引导他们，一直来到小孩子出生地方的上面才停住。"

This verse describes the journey of the wise men from the East who, after meeting King Herod, followed the star to find the newborn Jesus. The original English sentence is structurally complex, containing temporal clauses and relative clauses. The Mandarin Union Version, in alignment with the linguistic dimension of Eco-translatology, skillfully employs segmentation and word order adjustment. The temporal clause "when they had heard the king" is translated as "他们听见王的话就去了，" which clearly organizes the sequence of actions and conforms to Chinese syntactic logic, allowing readers to grasp the narrative progression. The relative clause "which they saw in the east" is rendered as "在东方所看见的那星，" with the modifier placed before the noun "星," following Chinese grammatical conventions. This transformation from a complex source structure to a clear and concise target structure significantly enhances readability and acceptability, facilitating the text's dissemination within the Chinese linguistic ecology.

The Modern Chinese Version also emphasizes word order adjustment. The phrase "听见了这话，他们就离开走了" improves sentence rhythm and fluency. The addition of the connector "这时候" strengthens logical coherence and continuity. While preserving the original meaning, the translation optimizes linguistic presentation

and reflects the translator's consideration of the target audience's reading preferences and habits. This demonstrates a deep understanding of both source and target linguistic ecologies and a flexible approach to transformation, promoting effective cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication.

Example 2
KJV: "And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way." (Matthew 2:12)
Mandarin Union Version: "博士因为在梦中被主指示，不要回去见希律，就从别的路回本地去了。"
Modern Chinese Version: "在梦中，上帝指示他们不要回去见希律，他们就从另一条路回自己的家乡去了。"

This verse describes how the wise men, warned by God in a dream, avoided returning to Herod and took a different route home. The original phrase "being warned" is in passive voice, indicating divine intervention. The Mandarin Union Version translates this as "被主指示," retaining the passive structure and faithfully reflecting the grammatical features of the source text. This allows readers to understand the relationship between the subject and the divine agent, preserving the stylistic flavor of the original.

The Modern Chinese Version renders it as "上帝指示他们," converting the passive into active voice, which aligns more closely with Chinese expression habits and emphasizes God's agency. This voice shift demonstrates the translator's subjectivity in adapting to the target language's norms while maintaining semantic accuracy. It reflects a thoughtful balance between fidelity to the source and fluency in the target language, facilitating effective transformation in the linguistic dimension and enhancing the accessibility of biblical culture across linguistic boundaries.

Transformation in Cultural Dimension

The transformation in cultural dimension in Eco-translatology focuses on the transmission and interpretation of cultural connotations (Hu Gengshen, 2011b). Translators must deeply understand the differences between the source and target cultures to avoid misinterpretation. When converting source language expressions, translators must consider the entire cultural system to ensure that culturally loaded terms and religious allusions are accurately conveyed, preserving cultural diversity and ecological balance.

The *Bible* is rich in religious and cultural connotations, with numerous culturally loaded terms and religious allusions. The translator's handling of these elements reflects their understanding of the source culture and their efforts to find appropriate expressions in the target language. For example, the translation of "wise men" as "博士" in the Mandarin Union Version and "星象家" in the Modern Chinese Version reveals different emphases. These choices reflect the translator's balancing of source cultural features and target reader acceptability, contributing to the cross-cultural transmission of biblical culture and maintaining the coherence of religious cultural ecology.

Example 1
KJV: "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem."
Mandarin Union Version: "当希律王的时候，耶稣生在犹太的伯利恒。有几个博士从东方来到耶路撒冷。"
Modern Chinese Version: "希律作王的时候，耶稣诞生在犹太的伯利恒城。有几个星象家从东方来到耶路撒冷。"

This verse, from Matthew 2:1, describes the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem during the reign of King Herod and the arrival of wise men from the East. From the cultural dimension perspective, the Mandarin Union Version translates "wise men" as "博士," an interpretive strategy that aligns with Chinese cultural perceptions of learned

and respected individuals. This helps readers quickly grasp the visitors' noble status and reverent intentions, reinforcing the sacredness of the event in the Christian cultural framework.

The Modern Chinese Version translates the term as "星象家," a more literal rendering that retains the original association with astrology. This choice preserves the source culture's depiction of the figures as astrologers, which may resonate with readers familiar with Western religious and astrological traditions. However, for many Chinese readers, this term may not immediately convey the religious significance of the figures, requiring additional explanation. Both versions reflect different strategies in cultural adaptation, balancing fidelity to the source culture and accessibility for the target audience, thereby promoting the transmission and understanding of biblical culture across cultural boundaries.

Example 2

KJV: "Out of Egypt have I called my son." (Matthew 2:15)

Mandarin Union Version: "我从埃及召出我的儿子来。"

Modern Chinese Version: "我从埃及把我的儿子召出来。"

This verse quotes a religious allusion from the Old Testament, symbolizing Jesus' divine mission and echoing the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. Both versions adopt a literal translation strategy, preserving the original form and religious connotation. For readers familiar with biblical culture, this approach facilitates accurate comprehension and maintains the source culture's "ecological niche" in the target language. However, for readers lacking background knowledge, the literal translation may obscure the deeper meaning, requiring supplementary explanation. This highlights the translator's challenge in balancing cultural preservation and reader comprehension, ensuring effective cross-cultural communication and maintaining the integrity of religious cultural ecology.

Transformation in Communicative Dimension

The transformation in communicative dimension in Eco-translatology requires translators to focus on the adaptive choices that ensure effective communication between source and target languages (Hu Gengshen, 2011b). Translators must accurately convey linguistic information and cultural connotations while preserving the communicative intent of the original text. From this dimension, translation effectiveness can be evaluated in terms of logical coherence, semantic accuracy, and pragmatic force, providing insights for improving translation quality and enhancing intercultural interaction (Hatim & Mason, 2001).

Example 1

KJV: "Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily." (Matthew 1:19)

Mandarin Union Version: "她丈夫约瑟是个义人,不愿意明明地羞辱她,想要暗暗地把她休了。"

Modern Chinese Version: "她的未婚夫约瑟为人正直,但又不愿意公开羞辱她,却有意要秘密解除婚约。"

This verse describes Joseph's reaction upon learning that Mary was pregnant before their marriage. In the cultural context of ancient Judaism, such a situation was extremely sensitive and could lead to public disgrace. The Modern Chinese Version introduces the conjunctions "但" and "却," which mistakenly imply a contrast between Joseph's righteousness and his unwillingness to shame Mary. This misrepresentation alters the original parallel structure and creates logical confusion, hindering the accurate transmission of the source text's communicative intent.

In contrast, the Mandarin Union Version maintains the original parallel logic: "是个义人," "不愿意明明地羞辱她," and "想要暗暗地把她休了" are presented in a coherent sequence that faithfully reflects Joseph's

character and decision-making process. This translation preserves the communicative force of the original and enables readers to clearly understand Joseph's moral dilemma and compassionate response. The Union Version thus demonstrates effective communicative dimension transformation by accurately conveying the source text's pragmatic intent and emotional tone.

Example 2

KJV: "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Matthew 3:7)

Mandarin Union Version: "约翰看见许多法利赛人和撒都该人也来受洗，就对他们说：'毒蛇的种类！谁指示你们逃避将来的忿怒呢？'"

Modern Chinese Version: "约翰看见许多法利赛人和撒都该人也来要求受洗，就对他们说：'你们这些毒蛇！上帝的审判快要到了，你们以为能够逃避吗？'"

This verse records John the Baptist's rebuke of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Modern Chinese Version translates "the wrath to come" as "上帝的审判快要到了," which shifts the meaning from divine wrath to divine judgment. This semantic deviation may mislead readers regarding the theological implications of the passage. Furthermore, the rhetorical question "who hath warned you to flee" is rendered as "你们以为能够逃避吗？," which weakens the original accusatory tone and diminishes the pragmatic force of John's rebuke.

In contrast, the Mandarin Union Version retains the phrase "将来的忿怒," preserving the original theological concept and emotional intensity. The rhetorical question "谁指示你们逃避将来的忿怒呢？" effectively conveys John's indignation and skepticism, maintaining the communicative intent and pragmatic strength of the source text. This demonstrates the translator's subjectivity in choosing expressions that balance fidelity and communicative effectiveness, ensuring that the translation resonates with readers while preserving the original message.

VI.   Conclusion

This study focuses on the Mandarin Union Version and the Modern Chinese Version of the *Bible*, exploring translator's subjectivity from the perspective of multidimensional transformations in Eco-translatology. The analysis yields several key insights.

In the linguistic dimension, the Union Version's word order adjustment aligns with Chinese syntactic logic, while the Modern Version's use of connectors enhances coherence. Both strategies reflect the translator's adaptation to the structural features of the target language and contribute to optimizing the linguistic ecology of the translation, thereby improving its communicative power.

In the cultural dimension, the translation strategies for culturally loaded terms such as "wise men" differ significantly. The Union Version prioritizes reader familiarity and cultural resonance, while the Modern Version emphasizes preservation of source cultural features. These choices reflect the translator's careful balancing of source culture and target audience expectations, facilitating the cross-cultural transmission of biblical culture.

In the communicative dimension, the Union Version accurately conveys logical relationships, semantic content, and pragmatic force, while the Modern Version occasionally exhibits deviations. Nonetheless, both versions demonstrate the translator's consideration of reader factors and communicative effectiveness. The comparative analysis reveals that translator's subjectivity is intricately woven into all dimensions of translation, driven by various factors such as source culture, target audience, and translational eco-environment.

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for the translation of religious texts, highlighting the importance of translator's subjectivity in achieving ecological adaptation and communicative success. Moreover, the application of Eco-translatology to classical texts such as the *Bible* expands the theoretical and practical scope

of translation studies, contributing to the ongoing innovation and development of the field. Future research may further explore other religious translations to refine the theoretical framework and enhance practical methodologies.

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