Visibility and Invisibility of the Translator in H.A. Giles's *A History of Chinese Literature*

PEINA ZHUANG & YINA CAO

College of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University, 24 Yihuan Road, Chengdu 610064, People's Republic of China. Email: alison19831208@163.com

The writing of literary history, generally speaking, is a matter of selecting and organizing literary works according to aesthetic judgement and historical values. If one writes the literary history of a foreign culture, however, at least if one wants to include samples of literary works, one must contend with the issue of translation, not only in the sense of having to choose which source texts to translate but also in that of choosing among existing translations or of translating oneself. The dual role of a historian and a translator is a challenging and complicated balancing act, as proven in the case of H.A. Giles (1845–1935), whose 1901 *A History of Chinese Literature* is the first Chinese literary history ever written in English. As one of the then leading sinologists in Europe, Giles had contributed tremendously to the dissemination of Chinese literature by way of smooth translations that appealed to his English readers, but which also formed an obstacle for the reader's proper understanding of the *history* of Chinese literature. The evidence for this comes from his misguided take on the dual aspects of visibility and invisibility of the translator's identity in writing about a foreign literature.

1. The Visibility as a Translator

The issue of visibility for H.A. Giles (1845–1935) as a translator of Chinese literature is quite evident from a large portion of his translated literary works. Before we continue, though, I want to clarify my use of the term 'visibility'. I do not use it in the sense given to it by Lawrence Venuti (2008) in *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. For Venuti, 'visibility' means 'foreignization', with the target or translated text retaining the syntax and other features of the source or original text. In other words, the reader cannot avoid noticing the intervention of the translator. 'Visibility', in the sense in which I use it, refers to how Giles turns his history into a literary anthology featuring mostly his own translations of the works he selects for inclusion.

In the preface to *A History of Chinese Literature,* Giles (1973, xvii) announces that

> Acting upon the suggestion of Mr. Gosse, to whom I am otherwise indebted for many valuable hints, I have devoted a large portion of this book to translation, thus enabling the Chinese author, so far as translation will allow, to speak for himself.

This motive is manifest in that more than half of Giles's 400-page book, supposedly a literary history, is actually made up of translations. For instance, the section 'Taoism – the Tao-Te-Ching', which takes up pages 56 to 74, for the largest part consists of translated passages of literary works interspersed with Giles's own at times sparse discursive commentary. Undoubtedly, the cause has to be sought in Giles's rich previous experience translating from the Chinese. In fact, he had devoted more than two decades to translating Chinese literature under different genres, thus accumulating enough materials for the completion of this book. His skills as a translator were praised by Ball (1901, 208) in his review of Giles's book:

> Many translations in past years have appeared from his pen, not only in the pages of reviews and magazines, but in volumes … Many of the translations embodied in the present work have therefore received the stamp of approval from a reading public, and will be recognized and welcomed in their new setting.

Prior to *A History of Chinese Literature*, Giles had already published *Gems of Chinese Literature* (1884), an anthology of classical Chinese literary texts. As Hong Zhang (1992) has pointed out, this work may well have motivated Giles to write a history of Chinese literature. Here is Giles (1922, i) himself in his 'Preface' to *Gems of Chinese Literature*:

> The present volume is a venture in a new direction. English readers will search in vain for any work leading to an acquaintanceship, however slight, with the general literature of China. Dr. Legge's colossal labours have indeed placed the canonical books of Confucianism within easy reach of the curious; but the immense bulk of Chinese authorship is still virgin soil and remains to be efficiently explored.

A collection of translations, then, or a proper narrative literary history? It seems that Giles was facing a dilemma: he wanted to construct a coherent literary history, but he ended up including a great number of translations because he decided it was better to let the works themselves speak to the English readers. As a result, his literary history becomes, to some extent, simply another version of *Gems of Chinese Literature* without achieving a real breakthrough from his previous scholarship.

Giles's visibility as a translator also shows in his selection of original texts for his *History*. The inclusion of works such as dictionaries, encyclopaedias and medical jurisprudence makes the book quite unwieldly. Of course, Giles's scholarship was subject to the limitations of his time. For one thing, Giles drew mostly on the resources of the library of Cambridge University, which did not come close to representing the entire reach of Chinese literary history. Guogong Zhang (1995, 89) noted in 1995 that 'Until very recent times, Sinology in Cambridge only dates back to one hundred years'. Giles's brief and simple references to other books, journals, or catalogues are

also telling for this limitation. For example, when it comes to references to other books, these are limited to the anthology *The Chinese Classics* (5 vols. 1861–1872) by the Scottish missionary and sinologist James Legge (1815–1897), the *Cursus Literaturae Sinicae* (5 vols. 1879–1883) of the Italian Jesuit Angelo Zottoli (1826–1902), headmaster of the Collège St Ignace in Shanghai, the first volumes of *Les Mémoires Historiques de Se-ma Ts'ien* (*Records of the Grand Historian*; 5 vols. 1895–1905) by the French sinologist Edouard Chavannes (1865–1918), and *Notes on Chinese Literature* (8 vols. 1867), a collection of notes on 2000 separate Chinese works classified into Jing (Classics), Shi (History), Zi (Philosophy), and Ji (belles lettres), as in the Imperial Catalogue, by the Protestant missionary Alexander Wylie (1815–187).

But it is not only the lack of relevant resources at the time that is at play. Giles's own concept of literature, which underlies his selection of works for translation, is unclear and ill-defined. Here, a brief review of the evolving meaning for the word 'literature' may help in clarification. As Weigui Fang (2014, 13) notes, 'The pure and exclusive meaning for literature only came into being around one hundred years ago'. The word 'literature' derives from the Latin 'litteratura' where the root 'littera' refers to knowledge, grammar, and writing. The emergence of concepts such as 'nation' brought along the use of the term in its modern sense. Literature then comes to embody a nation's culture, 'an autobiography of nations' (Palmer 1956, 39). Until the eighteenth century, though, it could be used to broadly mean 'all written products' (Leitch 2001, 28) and it came to be narrowed down to 'creative or imaginative works' (Eagleton 2004, 16) only during the Romantic period. Obviously, then, 'literature' in Giles's *History of Chinese Literature* more closely approximates 'all written products'. Moreover, Giles's selection of works may also have been influenced by the general tendency in European literary historiography and in the study of world literature in general at the turn of the twentieth century, when it came to non-European literatures, to pay attention only to older works and to treat all such works as having no scientific or scholarly value, and therefore part of the realm of 'literature' rather than of fact.

Giles's extensive experience in translating and anthologizing Chinese literature undoubtedly facilitated the completion of his *History of Chinese Literature*, especially during a time of limited resources. As such, his role as a translator is a highly 'visible' one. However, we should not be blind to the drawbacks of the book as an anthology of literary works pretending to be a literary history. A literary history's distinctiveness lies in not only taking literary texts as its basic objects of analysis, but also in presenting such works in a logical narrative context and discussing their background and poetics. Thus, a qualified literary history is also an intellectual history validating the necessity for its own (re)writing. In Giles's case this is a questionable assumption, as I will highlight shortly.

Interestingly, Giles's 'visibility' as a translator, in the sense that I have given to it earlier, on the macro-level, turns into 'invisibility', in the sense given to it by Venuti, on the micro-level of actual translation. Invisibility here refers to the translator's domesticating, to use the terminology of Shunqing Cao (2013), or naturalizing

the source or foreign text's diction, syntax and style according to the target literary system's conventions and expectations. In the process Chinese literary works are familiarized for English readers.

2. The Invisible Translator

At the very start of *The Translator's Invisibility*, Venuti (2008, 1) points out that the term invisibility

> refers to at least two mutually determining phenomena: one is an illusionistic effect of discourse, of the translator's own manipulation of the translating language, English in this case; the other is the practice of reading and evaluating translations that has long prevailed in the United Kingdom and the United States, among other cultures, both Anglophone and foreign-language,

As to the first phenomenon, 'the illusion of transparency is an effect of a fluent translation strategy, of the translator's effort to ensure easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing a precise meaning' (Venuti 2008, 1).

The second phenomenon leads to what Venuti (2008, 1) calls the invisibility of the translator in contemporary Anglophone cultures:

> A translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers … when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text – the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the 'original'.

Such a naturalizing or domesticating translational strategy actually seems to run counter to Giles's (1973, xvii) claim in the preface to his *History of Chinese Literature* that he will 'let the author speak for himself'. In most instances, it is in fact the translator that speaks on behalf of the author: a domesticating strategy leaves readers no chance to appreciate the aesthetic features of the source text since what they are reading looks like a smooth, 'natural', in fact a 'native', text. Now, the value of a literary work lies in both its content and its aesthetic form. The transmission of artistic form should not be sacrificed in a compilation of translations being passed off as a literary history. The selected works represent a nation's classics, the status of which, next to their content, also derives from their artistically innovative character. In this connection, what should be avoided is precisely the translator's invisibility on the levels of vocabulary, image, and style as displayed in Giles's literary history.

On the first level, Giles replaces certain original words with distinctively Western cultural terms. Take the word 'purgatory' for example. In his analysis of the *Hsiao Lin Kuang Chi* (*A Forestry of Jokes*), an anthology of classical Chinese jokes, under the section of 'Wit and Humor', Giles (1973, 436) uses the phrase 'the King of Purgatory' to render the original word 'Yanwang' (阎王) (Yama, king of hell). A brief review of the meanings for 'purgatory' reveals the cultural differences

between the two words. Purgatory usually refers to 'the place where, according to Roman Catholic beliefs, the souls of the dead people must suffer for the bad things they did, until they are pure enough to enter heaven' (Yang 2002, 1146). One can find vivid visual representations of this place in Western literary works such as, for instance, Dante's *Divine Comedy* where Purgatory is divided into seven levels where souls with different sins reside. In contrast, in ancient Chinese culture, similar places can be found in the concept of 'Shidian Yanwang' (十殿阎王), as in Buddhism, which refers to the ten Yanwang in charge of hell. After death, people come here to be judged for their deeds by the Yanwang without knowing definitely where to go after the judgement. The adoption of this term by the translator aims to present a familiar scene to the English readers for their better understanding. Such pursuit of familiarity reflects 'the general tendency to read translations mainly for meaning' (Venuti 2008, 1). Real cultural exchange, however, only occurs when a translator, and the compiler in Giles's case, pays due attention to the aspect of artistic forms and features, such as the cultural terms and images that make up the essence of a nation's literature. This may partly explain the rising popularity of foreignization over domestication in recent translation scholarship. Thus, 'the simple free and forced translation should be avoided for its failure to convey the culturally semiotic dimension of classical Chinese literary terms' (Zhuang 2017, 55) and transliteration may be an appropriate option in this regard, owing to the strong prescriptiveness of Chinese characters, since it is an effective weapon for avoiding 'neutralization' in translation. 'Prescriptiveness', concretely speaking, refers to 'prescribed pronunciation, writing and meaning of the Chinese language that originated from pictographs' (Zhao 2016, 86). Due to the fact of prescriptiveness being socially bound, the meaning of Chinese characters (dominated by such prescriptiveness) cannot be carried over across cultures. Originated from pictographs, another name for Chinese characters, is 'wen' (文), meaning 'pictures'. Zhao Yuanren (1892–1982), a famous Chinese linguist (Zhao 1968, 103–104), expounding on the 'four-kind of methods of word-formation', holds that 'Pictographs equal icon, and the other three, namely Ideographs, Compound Ideographs and Phonetic Compound, are all index developed based on pictographs.' The phenomenon of increased 'Phonetic Compound' in modern Chinese further promotes 'evolution in the Chinese character from icons into indexes and further into symbols guided by prescriptiveness' (Zhao 2016, 87). No wonder the translation of Chinese literary and cultural terms with their prescriptiveness still poses great difficulties for translators.

On the second level, that of imagery, domestication also prevails in the reconstructive representation of the literary scenes in translation. Classical Chinese literature has a tradition of conveying the internal ambitions and feelings of a poem's speaker through external objects, and this poses difficulties in translation. The translator should strive to find a balance between rigidly copying the juxtaposed images into the target language according to the source text's syntactical order and the total abandonment of such syntax. Take Giles's translation of the third poem 'Qiannong' (Slim-Stout) in the book 'Twenty-four Stanzas on the Appreciation of Poetry' composed in eighth-century China. Each poem expounds on a certain poetic style

and is tinged with philosophical and religious (mainly Taosim and Buddhism) colour in the expression of literary thoughts. 'Qiannong' symbolizes the third literary style:

采采流水，蓬蓬远春。

Gathering the water plants

From the wild luxuriance of spring,

窈窕深谷，时见美人。

Away in the depth of a wild valley

Anon I see a lovely girl.

碧桃满树，风日水滨。

With green leaves the peach-trees are loaded,

The breeze blows gently along the stream,

柳阴路曲，流莺比邻。

Willows shade the winding path,

Darting orioles collect in groups.

乘之愈往，识之愈真。

Early I press forward,

As the reality grows upon me.

如将不尽，与古为新。

'Tis the eternal theme

Which, though old, is ever new.

(Giles 1973, 180)

The first eight sentences of the poem describe beautiful scenery, presenting an artistic realm of tranquillity and beauty, integrating motion into stillness. For instance, '窈窕深谷' (Away in the depth of a wild valley) centres on the still side while '时见美人' (Anon I see a lovely girl) focuses on the motion in the scene, thus creating a 'realm of images viewed on its own without man's interference'. So 'the elements of sound, color, light, fragrance, object and man harmonize with each other and form a realm permeated with life so as to set forth the artistic realm in this poem just like a

landscape poetry' (Yu 2010, 129). Giles's efforts to recreate this exquisite scene are not effective because of the way that he makes the meaning of the poem transparent. He proceeds from the personal angle hidden in the poem rather than from the scene itself, thus the 'realm of images viewed on its own without man's interference' is changed into 'realm of images viewed from man's perspective', which does not reflect the flavour of the poem. The 'realm of images viewed from man's perspective' means appreciating the scene from the angle of a person and so everything is tinted with a personal flavour, while 'realm of images viewed on its own' refers to 'viewing the object without any human interference just on its own' (Wang 2003, 7). A look at the translation of the first four lines reveals that Giles compresses the four scenes into one sentence by adding the subject 'I,' the participle 'gathering' and the 'from' and 'away'. The shift to the first person by the use of 'I' destroys the tranquil beauty in the scene that thus is rendered into the realm with man's interference. The addition of 'I' determines the angle of the whole poem and fails to convey the reaching out to a realm beyond the existing scenes. Further, 'a lovely girl' in the rendition of '美人' does not conform to the delicate style of this image since the latter suggests a quiet girl in the deep valley while the former sketches a vivid and dynamic picture of the girl. Giles also misreads the meaning of '采采' in the poem by using the verb 'gathering' where it actually means the crystalline state of the waters.

Lastly, Giles's macro-structural rendering of the literary text in translation also demonstrates his preference for domestication. For example, 'Qingmingri Duijiu' ('In face of Wine on Tomb-sweeping Day') by Gao Zhu (1170–1241) is a poem that criticizes the custom of social sacrifice and ponders on the eternal issues of life and death. It does so via the depiction of the far away and adjacent scenery. The inclusion of this poem by Giles reflects its status as the classic among poems on Tomb-sweeping Day, but the 'variations' in its translation as compared with the original text need further discussion. First, the number of lines in the translated version varies greatly from the original one:

南北山头/多墓田，清明祭扫/各纷然。纸灰/飞作/白蝴蝶，泪血/染成/红杜鹃。

日落/狐狸眠/冢上，夜归/儿女笑/灯前。人生有酒/须当醉，一滴何曾/到九泉。

The northern and southern hills

    are one large burying-**ground**,

And all is life and bustle there

    when the sacred day comes ***around***.

Burnt paper cash, like butterflies,

    fly fluttering far and **wide**,

While mourners' robes with tears of blood

a crimson hue are ***dyed***.

The sun sets, and the red fox crouches

down beside the **tomb**;

Night comes, and youths and maidens laugh

where lamps light up the ***gloom***.

Let him whose fortune brings him wine,

get tipsy while he **may**,

For no man, when the long night comes,

can take one drop ***away***.

(Giles 1973, 237)[1]

Each of the eight short lines in the original poem is rendered into two lines so as to conform to English grammar without fully representing the semantic correspondence within two adjacent lines and the rhyme in the original poem, such as 然 ran, 鹃 juan, 前 qian, 泉 quan. A comparison between the source and the target text reveals that only the translation of '日落/狐狸眠/冢上，夜归/儿女笑/灯前' (The sun sets, and the red fox crouches down beside the tomb; Night comes, and youths and maidens laugh where lamps light up the *gloom*) complies with the corresponding feature. The first two lines change into a coordinate independent clause, the next two become an adversative clause and the last two are rendered into adverbial clauses of cause. Thus, the whole poem loses its succinctness and reads like an idiomatic English paragraph.

The target text also changes the tense of the source text. The active tense adopted in the original poem, in both the scenery and sacrifice description in the first four lines and the sublimation in the last two, aims to convey a direct communicative effect. But the passive tense used in the translation of '泪血/染成/红杜鹃' ('While mourners' robes with tears of blood a crimson hue are *dyed*') along with the omission of the cultural image '杜鹃' (cuckoo) is rather weak in displaying people's grief at that time. Hence retaining the active tense may be a better option: 'and tears of blood dye the hills a crimson hue comparable to that of a cuckoo.' In addition, although 'let him' in the last lines is no typical passive tense, it still fails to depict the author's assumed easiness but also real pessimism about life, which can be better conveyed if

---

1. The bold and bold italic text is used to emphasize that the translator of the poem retains the rhymed feature of the original poem.

one turns to using an affirmative sentence with 'I', 'We', or 'drink wine' (We should enjoy the wine of life and get tipsy while we may. For no man, when the long night comes, can take one drop away).

The rendition of culturally loaded terms and the absence of any further explanation for important allusions are a further problem. For example, the free translation of terms such as '清明节' and '九泉' as 'the sacred day' and 'the long night' indicates a sense of cultural filtering, which diminishes the cultural distinctiveness of the original poem. The translator sacrifices the nuances to the overall meaning. The absence of any explanation for some allusions further increases the difficulty for readers to fully understand what is going on: '白蝴蝶' (butterfly) and '狐狸' (fox) are not random images; they have their own cultural and historical contexts. '白蝴蝶' derives from Zhuangzi, the great third century BC Chinese philosopher. In one of his allegories, Zhuangzi in a dream finds himself changed into a butterfly, which can be interpreted as the thought of harmony between heaven and humanity, as pointed out by Wang (2002, 22): 'The metaphor through these two allusions, besides the function of enhancing vividness in the poem, contains the deep implications of devoted ancestor worship'. It also demonstrates the influence of early literary classics on succeeding literary creations and thus the persistence of a historical literary inheritance. Thus, a brief explanation is needed to clarify the deep meanings of what otherwise may seem random metaphors and images.

3. Conclusion

A literary history, simply put, is the organization of literary works within a historical framework. But when it comes to compiling the literary history of a foreign nation, things become much more complicated, as in the case of H.A. Giles acting as both compiler and translator. For one thing, his extensive experience as a translator overshadows the overall arrangement of the history and basically turns it into an anthology of translations. As such, it obviously falls far short of what a real history should be, since a qualified literary history calls for more than just a selection of literary works. For Georg Brandes (1997, 2) 'a single book, if judged purely from the aesthetic perspective, is a self-sufficient entity without any external relations. But the historical angle would reveal its status as a small patch cut from the infinite literary network'. Consequently, the awareness of the bigger 'network' should always be on the compiler's mind. Only by piecing together the small patches can a work be called a history. Obviously, Giles lost sight of this 'network'.

I earlier quoted Giles in the Preface to his *A History of Chinese Literature* as aiming to enable 'the Chinese author, so far as translation will allow, to speak for himself'. Rather than allowing the Chinese author to speak for himself, though, and as I have shown, his domesticating translation strategy makes his quasi-anthology literary history read like a native English text throughout and fails to convey the real aesthetic flavour and features of Chinese literature. This, in combination with the fact that his role of translator ultimately took precedence over

that of literary historian, leads us to conclude that Giles's *History*, while undoubtedly fulfilling a useful function as a first introduction, fell woefully short of giving his English readership a true picture of Chinese literature.

Acknowledgements

References

Ball JD (1901) Dr. Giles's history of Chinese literature. *The China Review* **25**(4), 207–210. https://hkjo.lib.hku.hk/archive/files/29631fc9446705975f937cda8bbd1d5d.pdf

Brandes G (1997) *Main Currents in 19th Century Literature*. Trans. Zhang DZ. Beijing: People's Literature Press.

Cao SQ (2013). *Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*. Heidelberg: Springer.

Chavannes E (1895–1905) *Les Mémoires Historiques de Se-ma Ts'ien* (**5** vols). Paris: Éditions Ernest Leroux.

Eagleton T (2004) *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Fang WG (2014) On the investigation of the western concept 'literature'. *Dushu* **5**, 9–15.

Giles HA (1884) *Gems of Chinese Literature.* Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh; London: Bernard Quaritch.

Giles HA (1901) *A History of Chinese Literature*. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

Giles HA (1922) *Gems of Chinese Literature*. Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, Limited.

Giles HA (1973) *A History of Chinese Literature*. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company.

Legge J (1861-1872) *The Chinese Classics* (**5** vols). London: Trubner.

Leitch V (2001) *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co.

Palmer DJ (1956) *The Rise of English Studies*. London: Oxford University Press.

Venuti L (2008) *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London and New York: Routledge.

Wang GW (2003) *Commentaries on Lyrical Work*. Hunan: Yuelu Publishing House.

Wang SJ (2002) A new interpretation of Gao Zhu's 'Qingmingri Duijiu'. *Journal of Hebei University* **27**(3), 20–22.

Wylie A (1867) *Notes on Chinese Literature*. London: Shanghai, American Presbyterian Mission Press.

Yang ZM (2002) *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 3rd edn. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Yu Y (2010) On the appreciation of the poem Qiannong and Chengzhuo. *Hubei Social Sciences* **8**, 129–131.

Zhang H (1992) *Chinese Literature in Britain*. Guangzhou: Huacheng Publishing House.

Zhang GG (1995) The history and status quo of sinology studies in Cambridge. *Trends of Recent Researches on the History of China* **3**, 89–95.

Zhao YH (2016) *Semiotics: Principles & Problems*. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press.

Zhao YR (1968) *Language and Symbolic Systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zhuang PN (2017) On translation of literary terminology as cultural sign: with focus on translation of literary terms in *History of Chinese Literature*. *Cultura. International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* **14**(1), 43–58.

Zottoli A (1879–1883) *Cursus Literaturae Sinicae*. Shanghai: Typographia Missionis catholicae.

About the Authors

Peina Zhuang is an Associate Professor in the College of Literature and Journalism in Sichuan University, China. Her research interests include comparative literature, comparative poetics, cultural studies and translation studies. Recent publications include 'On translation of literary terminology as cultural sign: with focus on translation of literary terms in *History of Chinese Literature*', *Cultura. International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* (2017), and 'The current situation and future of variation theory' (国内比较文学变异学研究综述：现状与未来), *Journal of South-Central University for Nationalities* (2015).

Yina Cao works in the College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University and her research interests include communication studies, cultural studies and translation studies.