

From TCM Practitioner to Translator: A Case of Bob Flaws' Translation in TCM Classics From Science Translation Perspective

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Abstract

Known as the founder of Blue Poppy, Bob Flaws is widely known as a writer and publisher in TCM field. Some researchers have investigated his efforts in publishing TCM classic and textbooks in the US; Little known is the role he played as a translator in introducing TCM classic to western. This paper presents an overview study of Bob Flaws' translation on TCM Classics, thus revealing his translation ideology from the perspective of Science Translation Theory.

Key words: Bob Flaws; TCM translation; Science translation theory; Scientific translation; Translation ideology

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1. INTRODUCTION

Bob Flaws is a well-known figure in the world of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and has made significant contributions to the field through his work as a writer, translator, practitioner and publisher. His efforts have helped to promote TCM and make it more accessible

to Western audiences. As a TCM pioneer practitioner, he has written countless articles on TCM and most of them were published in *Townsend Letter*. As a prolific writer, Flaws has written over 55 books and is known for his clear and concise writing style, which has helped to make complex TCM concepts more accessible to Western readers. As a publisher, he is the founder of Blue Poppy, a famous publishing company dedicated to the spread of TCM in the US. As a translator, Flaws has translated several important classical Chinese medical texts, helping practitioners gain a deeper understanding of the fundamentals of TCM and improve their clinical skills.

However, few researches have touched Bob Flaws' contribution in TCM field except that some experts analyzed his translation version of *Nan Jing* and his publishing enterprise dispersedly in articles regarding the translation of *Nei Jing*. For example, WANG Er-liang and CHEN Xiao (WANG & CHEN, 2020) pointed out that Bob Flaws' translation of *Nan Jing* was inclined to the terminology created by Nigel Wiseman. WEI Ying (Wei, 2013) had discussed Bob Flaws' translation strategies of interchangeable words in *Nan Jing*. WANG Er-liang (Wang, 2021) summarized the TCM classic works published by Blue Poppy. In conclusion, prior studies of Bob Flaws focused on his publishing achievement and his translation strategies in *Nan Jing* scatteredly, but there have been limited research on his translation ideology in TCM exposed in *Nan Jing* as well as other TCM classics. Therefore, this research would like to explore his translation ideology in TCM field in a boarder and comprehensive way by analyzing his translated version of TCM classics from the perspective of Scientific Translation Theory.

2. SCIENTIFIC TRANSLATION THEORY

Scientific translation theory is a branch of translation studies that focuses on the translation of scientific texts.

It involves the study of various aspects of translating scientific content, including language use, terminology, discourse structure, and communication strategies. Li Ya-shu and Huang Lian-zhong (Li & Huang, 2004) have stated the main criteria for assessing a successful scientific translation, that is, “One Core-Two Layers-Three Dimensions”.

“One core” refers to the only core standard of the whole scientific translated version is similar to the original text. Li and Huang divided the “similarity” into nine scales, from “very similarity” to “no similarity”. “Two layers” are formed by the first scale and the rest of eight scales, which are defined as (1) Literal translation, the translated version is nearly 100 % similar to the original text, that is, the content, genre, structure, language style are faithfully translated in accordance with the original text. (2) Free translation, the translated version isn’t as similar as the original version mainly because of the pursuit of effectiveness, to meet the needs of target audience. No matter literal translation or free translation, to judge a scientific translated version successfully or not are based on three aspects: pragmatic equivalence, semantic accuracy and form equivalence, which are defined as “Three Dimensions”.

The pragmatic equivalence mainly refers to accurately convey the original content and make it acceptable to the target readers of the translation, emphasizing the cultural, stylistic, and linguistic acceptability of the translated version. The semantic accuracy means the true connotation of the original text information, and the translation should try to translate as much of the original content from cultural, logical reasoning, scientific knowledge, and scientific terms as possible. Form equivalence means the translated version can reduplicate the superficial form of the text, such as the language, genre, style, rhyme, etc.

Among them, fully translation requires the content information to remain unchanged as much as possible, striving to convey it truthfully and completely; while partial translation emphasizes the pragmatic equivalence of the original work, considering the target readers and the context of acceptance, using strategies such as paraphrasing and interpreting to achieve “functional equivalence” or “dynamic equivalence” at the level of semantics. Without affecting the pragmatic value and semantic value, fully translation requires that the language form of the translated text be as similar to the original as possible; while partial translation allows for changes in the language form of the translated text to highlight its pragmatic value and semantic accuracy, so that it can convey the true connotations to the target readers and improve the acceptability of the translation.

Scientific translation theory emphasizes the need for effective communication strategies in conveying scientific information across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In conclusion, Li & Huang’s scientific translation theory

offers a comprehensive framework for evaluating and analyzing translations based on semantic and lexical accuracy, syntactic structures, stylistic features, pragmatic considerations, etc. By adhering to these principles, translators can create high-quality translations that effectively convey the original text’s message and resonate with diverse audiences.

3. BOB FLAWS’ TRANSLATION ON TCM CLASSICS AND THE CHARACTERISTIC OF TCM LANGUAGE

3.1 Bob Flaws’ Translation on TCM Classics

Bob Flaws was born in 1944 and first became interested in Chinese medicine while studying at the University of California, Berkeley. He went on to study TCM at the San Francisco College of Acupuncture & Oriental Medicine and later received his Master’s degree in TCM from the International Institute of Chinese Medicine. He has been a licensed acupuncturist and Chinese herbalist since 1978 and has practiced TCM for over 30 years. He and his wife also founded a publishing house called Blue Poppy Enterprises which was born from the vision to address an important need because in those days there were almost no written materials for students on TCM in English. Since then, Bob Flaws wrote, translated or edited more than 50 books or articles on acupuncture or Chinese medicine, among which he translated three TCM Classic, which were considered as key texts studied and referenced by practitioners of Chinese medicine till now.

Table 1
The TCM Classics Translated by Bob Flaws

English Title	Chinese Title	Year
The Lakeside Master’s Study of the Pulse	《濒湖脉学》	1998
The Classic of Difficulties: A Translation of the Nan Jing	《难经》	1999
Treatise on the Spleen and Stomach: A Translation and Annotation of Li Dong-yuan’s Pi Wei Lun	《脾胃论》	2004

The first book translated by Bob Flaws is *The Lakeside Master Study of the Pulse* (Bob, 1998), which was written by Li Shi-Zhen, a famous medical expert in the Ming Dynasty (1564). The book consists of two parts. The first part summarizes the essence of pulse study by various medical scholars before the Ming Dynasty. The second part contains “Four Essential Verses” written by his father Li Yan-wen, covering theories on pulse, diagnosis techniques, and more. The entire text is written in meter and verse, with harmonious rhyme and concise language conveying profound meanings. This book was first translated in 1998 by Bob Flaws and has reprinted 6 times since then.

The second TCM classics book translated by Bob Flaws is *The Classic of Difficulties: A Translation of the Nan Jing* (Bob, 1999). It's said that this book was written by Bian Que, a famous acupuncturist and TCM practitioner in the Warrior States period in ancient China. This book is a collection of eighty-one questions and answers seeking to clarify difficult passages or concepts within the *Huang Di Nei Jing (The Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic)*. Bob translated this book in 1999 and revised twice in 2002 and 2003 respectively.

The third book is *Treatise on the Spleen and Stomach: A Translation and Annotation of Li Dong-yuan's Pi Wei Lun* (Bob, 2004). The original book was written by Li Dong-yuan, a renowned physician and scholar of the Song dynasty in China. It is considered as one of the most important works in Chinese medicine, focusing on the relationship between the functioning of the spleen and stomach in maintaining overall health and balance in the body. It delves into the principles of yin and yang, the theory of qi and blood as well as the five elements. Bob Flaws translated this TCM classic in 2004.

3.2 The Characteristic of TCM Text

The above three traditional Chinese Classic are written in ancient Chinese by ancient TCM doctors. They always used concise but figurative language and created rhymed poems in the TCM texts, which possesses the characteristic of evenly distributed rhythms, concise language form for comprehensive connotations and lots of antithesis and metaphors (Zhu, 2021). So, in some extent, TCM texts contained the attribute of literary translation.

In addition, TCM texts recorded traditional Chinese medicine, including the doctrines, principles, diagnosis and formula, which are all about the facts, procedures, statistic and truth. So, TCM texts have the attribute of scientific translation with the characteristic of plain, concise, direct, and sincere language style. Translation itself aims to inform or instruct rather than entertain.

4. BOB FLAWS' TRANSLATION IDEOLOGY

4.1 Highlight literal translation

On translation of the above three books, Bob Flaws' translation ideology is to highlight literal translation. He mainly adopts literal translation approach when translating these TCM classics and faithfully duplicate the concise language and stylistic features of the original works. On one hand, his translation is always very short and concise, trying to sustain the succinct property of the TCM Classic. Take the example from *The Classic of Difficulties: A Translation of the Nan Jing* as follows:

脉有太过，有不及，有阴阳相乘，有覆有溢，有关有格，何谓也？

Translated version:

The pulses can be greatly excessive or they may not reach. One may have yin and yang seizing each other, turnover, or spillage, bar or block. What does this mean? (Bob, 1999)

Looking at the quoted paragraph in *Nan Jing*, Bob Flaws mostly applied the literal translation, since the original meanings in the words such as *excessive, not reach, yin, yang, turnover, spillage, bar, block, etc.* are well preserved. It's quite possible to obtain the original Chinese characters if these words are back translated. In addition, there are about 23 words in the original and 30 words in the translation, the number of which is much less than other translated version. What it means is that through the process of translation, Bob tried his best to reproduce the concise language style. In fact, this is actually what Bob Flaws explains in the preface *The Classic of Difficulties*. In ancient China, this TCM classic was meant to be memorized and recited, not just read, the style of which, in part, is to help memorize easier. "Therefore, I have tried to retain the succinctness of the original text as far as possible." (Bob, 1999)

4.2 Highlight form equivalence

On the other hand, his translation ideology mainly focused on the form equivalence. The source text of *The Lakeside Master's Study of the Pulse* is written in many short sentences constituted by four words or seven words with rhythm in them. So, when reading, it sounds very rhymed and is easy to spread around. Look at the following translation from this book:

迟大而软，按之无力，隐指豁豁然空。

Translated version:

The vacuous pulse(is)slow, large, and soft.

Press and it is forceless.

Concealed, the fingers suddenly find emptiness.(Bob, 1998)

As is seen here, this paragraph introduced the diagnosis technique of the vacuous pulse. The source text is written in four characters with three spatial short sentences. Chinese is called paratactic language, in contrasting to hypotactic English. English is inclined to use many conjunctions to reach cohesion within a paragraph, whereas Chinese uses very few of them (Zhu, 2021). In Bob Flaws' translation, we seldom find conjunctions, transition words, or logical connection words to provide the readers with hints. In terms of preserving the cultural characteristics, he preferred to translate in accordance with the original version, using alliteration or rhyme, such as "forceless" and "emptiness" in the above paragraph, to reproduce poetic style of TCM language. He also stuck to the Chinese sentence patterns to achieve form equivalence.

4.3 Dynamic pragmatic value

Given the concise translation style and form equivalence pursuit, the translated versions of Bob Flaws are somewhat alien to the targeted readers, because they don't

contain enough annotations and commentaries. Frankly Speaking, in scientific translation, the first purpose should emphasize its acceptability and clarity. Using simple and literal translation to illustrate the TCM language which is full of metaphor and rhetoric meaning is hard for the translators to reveal the original implications. Also in form, it may not appear as very cohesive to the native speaker as a complete text. That's to say, the translated sentences does not produce the same effect on the native speaker as it does on a Chinese reader, for an English speaker may think the language used there is not very idiomatic or clear.

But it may not be concluded that this translation ideology affects the pragmatic value, because Bob Flaws had another consideration. Before he translated *The Classic of Difficulties*, Dr. Henry C. Lu and Paul U. Unschuld had published the translated versions and gained wide popularity (Chen & Wang, 2022). As he has mentioned in the preface, many word-to-word commentaries of the *Nan Jing* exists in Chinese and have been included in Unschuld's translation. Therefore, no matter from the publishing purpose or from the academic purpose, the intention of this version set by Bob is to publish a totally different one from Unschuld's and retain the succinctness of the original TCM text as much as possible. As for the non-idiomatic and unclear flaws of this version, He even referred readers to further elaboration of this classic by reading Unschuld's version.

The same situation existed in the translated version of "The Lakeside Master's Study of the Pulse". Before he translated this book, H.K. Huynh & G.M. Seifert had translated this book named *Pulse Diagnosis by Li Shizhen* (Huynh & Seifert, 1985). Different from Bob's, this version is specifically designed for TCM education and explained the different pluses in detailed with pictures and tables, because "it's a translation of a modern Chinese commentary or explanation of that text" (Bob, 1998). Therefore, when translating the same TCM classic, Bob did the opposite way. The pragmatic value is to "maintain its succinctness and brevity" and "give an accurate and faithful rendition of this extremely important Chinese medical text" for TCM lovers. He also mentioned that the purpose of this translated version is to provide "a research source for other practitioners and Chinese medical scholars to comment on and debate" (Bob, 1998).

When Bob Flaws translated *Pi Wei Lun*, he changed his previous translation ideology. At that time, the theories and treatments for chronic disease shown in this book is little known to western practitioners, and the first translated version contributed by Yang Shou-zhong and Li Jian-yong didn't make any commentaries, so it's too difficult for many readers to understand the clinical gist of this TCM classic. Therefore, Bob adjusted his translation ideology by adding commentaries and case histories to

"make its wisdom more accessible to modern readers and learners" (Bob, 2004).

As is seen in the above, Bob's translation ideology is to highlight literal translation and form equivalence while keeping dynamic pragmatic value. Serving the different pragmatic function, Bob's translation ideology changed in line with translation purpose to optimize the pragmatic value.

5. CONCLUSION

"One Core-Two Layers-Three Dimensions" is main criteria for scientific translation. The analysis of Bob Flaws' translation from this perspective gives us a new insight to evaluate the contribution of his translated versions and widen the application of scientific translation theory in the field of TCM translation.

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