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Translator's Style and Its Development: An Interview with Allan Barr

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Introduction

Yajie Li analyzed Allan Barr's evolving translation style using a parallel corpus and seven stylistic markers, including sentence structure, word usage, and speech presentation, to identify distinctive features across his translations of Yu Hua's works. After conducting a detailed textual analysis, Li presented her findings to Allan Barr to seek his insights into her conclusions and stylistic considerations, aiming to deepen her research into the factors influencing Barr's evolving translation style. The interview, conducted via the ZOOM platform on October 23 2023, covered Barr's translation journey, including his experience translating four of Yu Hua's literary works. Barr shared his perspectives on translation style, outlined the intended audience for his translations, and discussed the reception of Chinese-translated works in the book market. He also elaborated on his strategies for balancing fidelity to the source text with readability in the target language.

Yajie Li (YL): Focusing on your translation style and its development, I applied corpus-based research with a self-established corpus composed of Yu Hua's four literary works and your translations. Your first translation in my study is *Boy in the Twilight: Stories of the Hidden China*, the second one is *Cries in the Drizzle*, the third one is *The Seventh Day*, and the last one is *The April 3rd Incident: Stories*. You live and receive your education in Great Britain. It differs from many translators of Chinese contemporary works, such as Andrew Jones and Howard Goldblatt, who mainly studied and lived in America. Do you think your different educational background might distinguish your translation style and ideology from theirs?

Allan Barr (AB): It is possible, although I don't know how exactly my British upbringing has influenced my translation style and ideology. It is true that my secondary education and university education were in Britain, but I didn't start translating until after 2000. I'd already been living in America for 20 years and been in contact with American academic culture. So, I don't think there's such a distinct contrast between my approach and American translators' approach as it would be the case if I spent all my life in Britain. Although my formative years were in Britain, I wasn't a translator in those days. I'd be surprised if I could trace differences in my style to my British background exactly.

YL: Although you didn't start your translation career when you were in Britain, is it possible your life in Britain and your awareness of the differences between British and American culture influenced your choices in translation?

AB: I think my choice of words would reflect my British background to some degree. I might favor some words that are more commonly used in Britain. So, I sometimes run into issues with copy editors who are American and working in America. They will point out that a word I use is British usage instead of American usage. I grew up in Britain, but now I have lived in America for so long. Sometimes, I'm not entirely clear in my own mind whether a word I'm using is in American or British style. That's a complicated matter. But it can mean

that although my books are published in America, as I grew up in Britain, I'm conscious that British readers might read the work. I would probably try to avoid using a very American idiom that sounds odd to a British reader because a distinctively American idiom might introduce an element of American culture when the book is written by a Chinese author. Therefore, it might mean that my language is a bit more neutral. It's not such an Americanized tone as one might find with some American translators.

YL: You have accepted at least four interviews (Barr & Yang, 2019; Wang & Barr, 2021a; Wang & Barr, 2021b; Zhao & Barr, 2020) and given lectures in many Chinese universities about your translation and academic research. Do you think the questions from the interviewers and audience help you make a reflection on your translation and translation style and then reshape your translation style or change your linguistic and translation-strategy choices?

AB: I don't think the interviews or questions from listeners would make me change my style or my choices. But sometimes, they've alerted me to things that I wasn't so aware of before. I have read a study by Wang Baorong, where he looked at my translation of *Digitian* (《第七天》) (Wang & Cui, 2019). I'd originally thought that I tended to put a high priority on fluidity and fluency in translation, which might lead me to make choices that made things easier and more accessible for the Western reader. But the conclusion of his study showed that, more often than not, I foreignized and preserved very typical Chinese expressions, and I didn't necessarily look for an English equivalent. I hadn't realized that. And so, it made me aware that it's not so clear-cut that sometimes I might choose a more reader-friendly translation, and other times I might more directly translate the Chinese expression into English. So, I find it quite interesting to read these studies of my work because it makes me conscious of things that I might not have noticed before. But I don't think that questions or comments have made me feel that I need to do something different. It's simply that I feel more knowledgeable and better informed on the basis of those observations from others.

YL: You and Goldblatt would like to contact the author when encountering unfamiliar or ambiguous expressions in the translation, while translators such as Carlos Rojas never contact the author during his translation. How did your contact with the author improve your translation?

AB: I originally was a scholar of Ming and Qing fiction. My dissertation is on Pu Songling (蒲松龄) and *Liaozhai zhiyi* (《聊斋志异》). If you study the writing from the late imperial period, you cannot communicate with the authors. You can't ask them questions, as they're no longer alive. And so, one thing that appealed to me about translating living authors is that you have the opportunity to interact with them, ask them questions, and have conversations with them. So, my approach is to reach out to the author, make contact, and then, if I have questions, ask them. It seems to me the more I know, the better equipped I'll be to do a translation. When I translated *Zaixiyuzhong huhan* (《在细雨中呼喊》), a question arises when the narrator mentions "yang" (羊), which is an issue that also comes up in the English translation of *Huozhe* (《活着》). Just what are "yang"? Are they "sheep", "lambs", or "goats"? How exactly should you translate the word? It seems to me quite helpful to know what Yu Hua has in mind when he uses it. Also, in *Zaixiyuzhong huhan*, he mentioned "xiao lu (小路)," which means some kind of "little road." So what exactly is that little road like? Is it paved? Is it just a mud track? Is it wide enough for a vehicle, or is it just a footpath? It seemed to me it would be helpful to have an image in my mind of this "xiao lu," for then we can know how to render it in English and create an image in the reader's mind. If I ask the author questions like this, I typically get

a specific answer which can help give the translation a clear focus.

For me, it's illuminating to know what Yu Hua had in mind when he used to pick a word. Otherwise, there's a danger that I might misunderstand and go off on the wrong track a little bit. I think the more I understand the author's vision of what's happening in their book, the better and stronger position I will be in to create that in English.

YL: Does it mean that you would like to reproduce or recreate the author's thoughts rather than create the literary text?

AB: Not always. I still have my own vision and understanding. I can't hope to grasp all the thoughts in the author's mind. I'm sure they have other thoughts and ideas. And it's not as though I go through the book asking the author to explain every line. But some words are ambiguous and don't give me a clear picture. Then, I might well consult the author about just what's the implication there.

YL: How do you understand Yu Hua's views on the translator's position between loyalty to the ST and the consideration of the target readers' language norms and reading expectations?

AB: I sense that Yu Hua has quite a balanced and nuanced view where, on the one hand, he would like to see the subject of the ST reflected fairly faithfully, but not so faithfully that the target text (TT) might seem awkward or unnatural when that's not true of the ST. I think he's made it clear to me and other translators that he understands that the target language has its own norms and that the translator needs to take those into account. So, I think it creates a good deal of healthy flexibility that encourages me as a translator to represent and recreate the ST as fully as possible, but at the same time not feel that I need to be enslaved by it. I do not feel inhibited from using some creative touches here and there to most effectively convey the spirit of the original.

YL: *Boy in the Twilight* was not published until 11 years later after you accomplished its translation. Yu Hua's fame during the 11 years must be helpful for its publication. How have you seen the change in Yu Hua's popularity in America since you started to translate his works?

AB: Right. So it's true that back in 2002 when I completed the translation of *Boy in the Twilight*, Yu Hua's editor in New York felt it wasn't the right time to release the book because she felt it wouldn't sell well, and maybe Yu Hua wasn't well enough known for the book to attract attention. But it eventually was published, in part because Yu Hua had published *Brothers*, which attracted a good deal of media attention, and in part because *Boy in the Twilight* came after *China in Ten Words*, which is a very successful book. So that gave Yu Hua's editor the extra confidence that *Boy in the Twilight* wouldn't just disappear without getting some notice. So yes, the increasing reputation of Yu Hua certainly helped his later books to get published and to get attention.

YL: How did you adjust *Boy in the Twilight* during the 11 years? Have you made any revisions to it?

AB: Yes, I did. In fact, I think that originally your assumption was that *Boy in the Twilight* was my first translation, and then *Cries in the Drizzle* was my second. But it's not quite that simple: I completed the manuscript for *Boy in the Twilight* before *Cries in the Drizzle*, but

Cries in the Drizzle was published first. And so what this meant was that a lot of time passed between my completion of the manuscript of *Boy in the Twilight* and its publication. I didn't just put it aside and not look at it. I went back to it occasionally and made some revisions. And so some of the differences you notice between *Cries in the Drizzle* and *Boy in the Twilight* are actually because, by the time *Boy in the Twilight* was published, I'd developed some ideas that I didn't have when doing *Cries in the Drizzle*. For example, the question you focus on in your research is the way that direct speech is introduced. I think when I was doing *Cries in the Drizzle*, I focused on other issues. And so I didn't give so much thought to whether I should translate "said" or leave it out. In contrast, *Boy in the Twilight* is a thin book and not nearly as substantial as *Cries in the Drizzle*. And the language of *Boy in the Twilight* is simple and very economical. So, it seems particularly important in *Boy in the Twilight* to not have words in English text that are redundant or unnecessary. That's why, in *Boy in the Twilight*, as you notice correctly, the ST often says, "So-and-so said," but I might omit that in my English translation because it's clear from context who is speaking. Because the text is so terse and compact, tags like, "So-and-so said" appear to be not really necessary. In the case of *Cries in the Drizzle*, whose language is richer and there's more happening, I think I really didn't give so much attention to how direct speech is introduced. *Cries in the Drizzle* follows the Chinese text more closely because I was a less experienced translator when I did that book. The revised final version of *Boy in the Twilight* that has been published and that you're working with reflects my more advanced ideas and more sophisticated sense of what needs to be in the book and what doesn't need to be there.

YL: On the website "Goodreads," *China in Ten Words*, *The Seventh Day*, and *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows: A Memoir* are the three best-selling books among all your translations. Do you think readers in the English world are fond of non-fictional works?

AB: Non-fictional works can certainly sell very well. Plenty of memoirs written by famous people are best sellers. But fictional books can sell even better. I am not saying Yu Hua's fictional books sell better, but generally, a novel can be very popular and sell many copies. I think *China in Ten Words* sells well because it's a very readable book. It contains lots of good stories, and there's humor and some very memorable scenes. It's an appealing concept to examine different aspects of the Chinese experience through the lens of ten words in the modern Chinese lexicon. That's a design that a lot of people can enjoy. The author of *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows: A Memoir*, Ai Weiwei, is a very famous artist and activist, and he too has a very interesting story to tell. And so I can see why that book is popular, too. It's got nice illustrations. He talks about his father's life as well as his own. So it's a very rich book.

YL: According to your understanding, why does *The Seventh Day* gain more popularity than Yu Hua's other fictional works?

AB: We're only talking about the ones I've translated, right? In terms of the books I translated, *Cries in the Drizzle* is perhaps not an easy book to like. It's got a lot of unattractive characters. One of the most sympathetic characters, Su Yu, dies right about 1/3 of the way through the book. The novel has been described as a collection of short stories loosely linked together, and it's a little bit hard to follow. Because events are not presented in chronological order, the novel jumps back and forth between different phases in the narrator's life. It's not the most reader-friendly narrative. *Boy in the Twilight* is a short story collection. Short stories generally tend to engage readers less than a novel, which can draw you into its world. You identify with the characters, sympathize with them, want to know what happens to them, and

can feel fully absorbed. So, novels tend to be more popular than short stories. And then *The April 3rd Incident* is also not so easy to like; the stories are a bit strange. So that leaves *The Seventh Day*, a short novel, a little over 200 pages long—a nice, comfortable length. You have a central character who's quite likable. It's definitely got more commercial appeal than the other fictional works I have translated.

YL: All your translations were published by the American press. What is the scope of your assumed target readers when you are translating each book? Have you considered the readers in the English world outside of America?

AB: I assume that readers would be intelligent people who perhaps know something about China or at least are curious about China. They've read literature and appreciate good writing. I imagine they could be living in America, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, or Canada. I don't have any concrete idea where they are. They are obviously people who are comfortable with reading English. They even may not be native English speakers.

YL: The data about the lexical density or the vocabulary richness of the ST and the TT showed the vocabulary richness in your translation would change with that of the ST and was closer to that of the general corpus of English original writing with time. The findings suggested that you are faithful to the ST in the choice of words. On the other hand, the vocabulary usage of your translation was increasingly similar to that of the English original writing rather than the translated text. What do you think of the findings about your vocabulary choices?

AB: I translated five Yu Hua's books altogether, and we're talking about only four works of fiction. So, four books aren't that much. And the differences between their lexical density might be influenced by the other variables. *Cries in the Drizzle*, for example, is set clearly in the larger half of the Cultural Revolution, and that affects its language. *Boy in the Twilight*, on the other hand, is set in the early reform era. It's not clear to me that it is my vocabulary that has changed rather than that the vocabulary of Yu Hua's work has changed.

YL: Compared with Andrew Jones' translations, the average sentence length of your translations was closer to that of the ST and the norms of Chinese original writing. Have you realized that you attempted to use some strategies or devices like semicolons or dash to reproduce the ST's style of parsing the sentences?

AB: Yes, I was aware of that, and it was a conscious decision to try to replicate or, at least, to some extent, reflect the original sentence length in the ST. I think one feature of Yu Hua's writing is that there are quite long sentences in some of his books. However, the sentences often don't have a strong grammatical structure, so there is quite often a series of things that happen, and they're linked with commas. In English, however, it seems a bit clumsy to continually use commas to connect things. So, the temptation for the translator is to break a long sentence into multiple short sentences. The drawback to that is that whereas Yu Hua's prose flows quickly, once you change commas to periods the action seems to slow down. So, I made an effort to avoid both the over-use of commas and the over-use of periods, using relatively open punctuation in order to capture the pace of Yu Hua's writing.

YL: Were you conscious of applying various devices to preserve or change the ST's sentence forms at the beginning of your translation journey?

AB: Maybe I had sharper awareness as time went on, but from quite early on, I felt it was best to avoid breaking a long sentence into multiple short sentences.

YL: In my study, your four translations of Yu Hua's works were investigated based on your creating time. The results of the average sentence length showed that you were closer to the English writing norms in your first translation (*Boy in the Twilight*); you were loyal to ST in your second one (*Cries in the Drizzle*); you became flexible in parsing the ST's sentence to keep the balance between the loyalty and readability in your later two translations. Have you realized the changing style of your way to parse the ST's long sentences?

AB: I would note that Yu Hua's style has changed, too. It would be appropriate for my style to change because he hasn't had a single style throughout his career. For example, take *Zaixiyuzhong huhan*. I think a number of people commented it's quite a Westernized style of Chinese writing that Yu Hua uses in that book. Unlike in, say, *Huanghun li de nanhai* (《黄昏里的男孩》), there tends to be a strong grammatical architecture in *Zaixiyuzhong huhan*. Yu Hua said that's perhaps because, at that time, he was reading a lot of Western fiction in Chinese translation. So I found *Cries in the Drizzle* fairly easy to translate, given its literary style and quite elegant language. I felt *Cries in the Drizzle* translated smoothly without me needing to make many adjustments in a sentence. *Boy in the Twilight*, on the other hand, has many sentences of the kind I was just describing, where a series of events are linked by commas and packed into a single sentence. In my mind, that needs some adjustment to make it palatable to English readers.

By the time I translated *The Seventh Day*, I had already accumulated experience working with Yu Hua's writing. I think I probably had built up a strategy for dealing with things that came up. Maybe things went more smoothly. Of course, the language of *The Seventh Day* is fairly simple. I wouldn't say it's a terribly difficult book to translate. So it maybe wasn't that big a challenge to translate or to make it comprehensible, explicit, and simple because, in Chinese, it's perfectly comprehensible. I think *The April 3rd Incident* was more challenging, because these are difficult stories in Chinese, with elements that are liable to confuse the reader. I wanted to retain some of those features, but at the same time, I didn't want to so perplex the book's readers that they could not make sense of what they were reading. That's why I made an effort to make the stories a bit more accessible. So I feel it wasn't so much that my style was changing, but rather the particularities of the texts that I was translating.

YL: Was it your decision to italicize or capitalize certain words or paragraphs, such as conversations or the narrator's illusions in Yu Hua's avant-garde works?

AB: Italicizing certain passages in *The April 3rd Incident* (particularly in the title story and *Summer Typhoon*) was my idea; I felt it would help make the stories easier to follow and enjoy. I had noted that William Faulkner uses italics in some of his novels to signal a character's internal musings, and I found this to be a useful device. I consulted Yu Hua on this point, and he strongly approved.

YL: While Jones only italicized the words in the speaker's directly reported speech, you italicized the words in the speaker's spoken words and the narrator's narration. Do you have different rules to choose the italicized words in the spoken words and narrator's narration?

In terms of the speaker's spoken words, I think my approach is probably similar to other translators in that if it's important that direct speech captures the emphasis in the speaker's words, then italics can come in helpful in order to underscore where the emphasis in the sentence is. So, although the ST may not use italics as it's not normal in Chinese for italics to be used that way, it's customary in English when a written text wants to emphasize where the stress is in a sentence. I think my practice is in keeping with the generally prevailing practice. In terms of the narrators' narration, there are some capitalized words in *Boy in the Twilight*. But that was the work of the book designer, Iris Weinstein, I think the idea was to give the book more visual interest. It highlights the change in time between one section and another. But that wasn't a decision I made.

YL: In *The Seventh Day*, I found you mainly italicized words in the utterances between Yang Fei and his wife. Do you think the reason is that you are impressed by the passion and regret between them?

AB: Yang Fei's wife appears mainly in the early part of the book. After that, she disappears. I see one use of italics on page 51. "Then she pinched my nose. 'Why didn't *you* pursue me?'" I italicized "you" because I think without it, the line would be less effective and clear. The italicized word shows that she was pursued by the other men. It's obvious that Yang Fei's marriage was an important event in the character's life. So, anything I can do as a translator to make that experience come alive for the reader is valuable. It would be unfortunate if this episode came out in a flat and uninteresting way. It wasn't that I personally was invested in the character's love affair and marriage, but rather that I felt it was important for the book for this relationship to come across vividly. I didn't necessarily think the relationship between Yang Fei and his wife was more important than all the other relationships, but at least in this part of the book it's the main focus of interest.

YL: For example, A: "Who are you?" they asked.

B: "Who are you?"

In the above two examples, A is a direct speech (DS) with a reporting clause "they asked," and B is a free direct speech (FDS). What are your principles for translating FDS and DS?

AB: When you first start out as a translator, you tend to follow the ST quite closely. So, if the ST says, "So-and-so said," your impulse is to include that in the translation. At the outset, when I translated *Cries in the Drizzle*, I was inclined to follow the lead of the ST by identifying the speaker with "they asked," "she said," or whatever. But over time I came to feel that it was a mistake to follow the ST too closely; if it's clear to the reader who says something, then you don't need to say so in the translation. I was more conscious of that when revising *Boy in the Twilight*. There's an example in the story *Their Son* (*Tamen de Erzi*, 《他们的儿子》), where the son takes a taxi home, and his parents are horrified by his extravagance. In the original, when the father and mother speak to each other, the narrator each time identifies who is speaking. Actually, there's no ambiguity about that, and to the English reader, these tags seem unnecessary. So I felt the translation would be stronger if I simply omitted them. My approach to repetition in that passage is similar. I think the husband is named four or five times, and the wife is named four times. But to English readers, the pronouns "he" and "she" differentiate them perfectly well—we don't need to be reminded of their names all the time. So again, it seems to me that being too faithful to the ST can be detrimental to the translation if this leads to redundancy or unnecessary repetition.

YL: Have you changed your principles of translating FDS and DS with time?

AB: Obviously, it's worked out a little bit differently from your original understanding. *Cries in the Drizzle* reflects my early priorities, where I was inclined to follow the ST in explicitly identifying the speaker each time there was direct speech. But gradually, it became apparent to me that often the translation is more powerful and direct if those reporting clauses are omitted. That's why *Boy in the Twilight* has much less of "he said" and "she said." It's more direct.

With the passage of time, I can't always explain why I made one choice or another. There was a certain element of instinct about what worked well in that particular situation. I don't think I necessarily had a consistent policy. I looked at things on a case-by-case basis.

I haven't really thought very much about my strategy in the later two translations. But I'm certainly conscious of the differences between *Cries in the Drizzle* and *Boy in the Twilight*. As I explained, *Cries in the Drizzle* was my first published translation. Although I had completed a first draft of *Boy in the Twilight* some years earlier, because of the long delay before the book's publication I had more time to think about *Boy in the Twilight* and more time to revise and polish the translation. *Cries in the Drizzle* reflects my relative lack of experience with translation. In comparison, *Boy in the Twilight* shows my confidence to intervene more firmly, because I had already translated three or four books by the time it was published.

YL: You actively changed the position of the reporting clause, while Jones reserved over 98% of the ST position of the reporting clause. As authors always place the reporting clause before the utterance in the original Chinese writing, you switched their position to place them after the reported speech, following the norm of English writing. What is your purpose for altering the position of the ST's reporting clause?

AB: As you say, the norm of English writing is to have the reporting clause after, so I'm following the English convention. It wasn't clear to me that there was an advantage for the reader to have the reporting clauses come first. Although that's the norm in Yu Hua's texts, I didn't see that the English reader benefited from it. If you have the speech first, the speech more quickly captures the readers' attention. Then the reporting clause just clarifies who says it, in case there is any doubt. Andrew Jones was a translator of *Xu Sanguan maixuejie* (《许三观卖血记》). We need to take into account the particularities of each book because they're not all the same. It seems to be a characteristic of *Xu Sanguan maixuejie* that there's a lot of direct speech. It's almost as though it's a drama where the characters are playing different roles. The advantage of maintaining the subjects and the ST position of the reporting clause is that it mimics the original, like in a script of a play, where you identify the speaker before they say their piece. Some chapters in *Xu Sanguan maixuejie* consist almost entirely of dialogue. That may be why Jones followed the source text so closely. But the books that I translated are organized differently.

YL: Do you think the position of the reporting clause can influence the stylistic effects of the text and readers' reading experience?

AB: It's hard to quantify their influence. I'm a bit doubtful whether this is a really important issue. Does the translation benefit from preserving the position of the reporting clause that one finds in the source text? You could argue that because it is less familiar to the English reader,

it might make more impression. It might be positive. But, on the other hand, readers might find it annoying or strange in a not such a good way. You would have to ask readers about that. I cannot read their minds. I don't know what they think about it. I know only what seems best to me.

YL: Do you have another plan for your next translation?

AB: I'm currently translating excerpts from *Xu Xiake Youji* (《徐霞客游记》), the travel diaries of a late Ming explorer and traveler. It's a collaborative project, with several other scholars involved. I'm going to China next week, and may well develop plans for new translation projects while I'm there. We'll see.

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