

# A Study of the Concept of “Faithfulness” in Traditional Chinese Translation Discourse from the Perspective of the Wen-Zhi Debate

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## Abstract

The Wen-Zhi Debate had a significant impact on the formation of the core concept of “faithfulness” in traditional Chinese translation theory. A review of the development of traditional Chinese translation theory reveals the evolution of this concept through the viewpoints of representative translators in different historical periods. The development of the core concept of “faithfulness” in traditional translation theory has traversed four key notions, namely, unhewn translation, sincerity and fidelity, similarity in form, and faithfulness. By tracing the origins and evolution of the concept of “faithfulness”, this study aims to offer new theoretical insights for the study of the main thread of traditional Chinese translation discourse.

Keywords: traditional Chinese translation discourse; the Wen-Zhi Debate; faithfulness

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## 1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese translation has discourse been developed for more than 2000 years. The study of the history of Chinese translation theory began a hundred years ago (Zhao 105). According to the word frequency statistics of key words, the topics of Chinese translation theory are “traditional translation theory”, “translation theory” and “traditional Chinese translation discourse” in descending order (Huang and Fei 23).

For the diachronic understanding of traditional Chinese translation discourse, Luo (19) summarized it as a monolithic system consisting of four stages, namely, “relying on the original text - seeking fidelity - striving for likeness - reaching the realm of transformation”. However, Chen (ii) questioned this statement: “Is it correct to use these eight characters to summarize the development history of our translation theory? Is it really a single-line system?” Similarly, Chen (10) proposed traditional Chinese discourse on translation had developed along two main threads running parallel to each other. Oriented toward faithfulness, the first thread is identifiable with five key notions, namely, unhewn translation, sincerity and fidelity, literal translation, similarity in effect, and unmediated transparency between ST and TT. The second thread, with a general orientation toward beauty, runs through another set of five key concepts, including refined translation, elegant translation, free translation, vividness in spirit, and transmigration of souls. Among them, the traditional Chinese translation discourse discusses the concept of “faithfulness” in one body but in multi-faceted. Unity,

that is, emphasizes the faithful nature of “faithfulness”. While multi-faceted, it emphasizes that “faithfulness” focuses on different meanings in different situations. The “faithfulness” of the translated text is oriented to the original text, emphasizing that the content and style are faithful to the original text. The translator’s “faithfulness” emphasizes that the translator should be faithful to the coordination and communication between the source text and the target text. It can be seen that the connotation and category of “faithfulness” in traditional Chinese translation theory are not limited to the level of translation. Therefore, based on the existing research on the concept of “faithfulness” which is the main line of traditional translation theories, this paper tries to construct a more complete and accurate research system to better explain the development of the concept of “faithfulness” and make up for the ambiguities in the existing research.

Therefore, this article will employ textual analysis and historical materials to examine the Wen-Zhi Debate in ancient China, its key figures, as well as the translators and their translation theories across different historical periods. This approach serves as the entry point and research focus, supplementing the diachronic study of Chinese translation theory. It aims to further elucidate the relationship between the Wen-Zhi Debate and traditional Chinese translation discourse, particularly exploring its impact on the 'faithfulness' view within traditional translation theory and its evolutionary trajectory.

## 2. The relationship between the Wen-Zhi Debate and Chinese traditional translation discourse

Throughout the history of translation in China, the development of Chinese translation discourse has always progressed hand in hand with the development of translation practice. The earliest translation theory emerged from the practice of translating Buddhist scriptures. The Wen-Zhi Debate, as the starting point of traditional Chinese translation discourse, is considered to be the beginning of it and has played an important role in Chinese translation history, exerting a significant influence on the main thread of traditional translation discourse.

In this period, the incompleteness of translation theories directly led to the adoption of translated text quality as the standard for evaluating translation. When scholars attempted to consolidate scattered translation theories into a systematic framework, the prominent terms “Wen” and “Zhi” naturally emerged as core and pivotal concepts in Buddhist sutra translation theory. This debate primarily revolves around whether translating Buddhist sutras should prioritize faithfully conveying the original meaning or pursuing linguistic beauty. The discourse on text quality has initiated a discussion on striking a balance between literary aesthetics and accuracy in translation, while the profound study and contemplation of Buddhist sutra translation have laid a foundation for later theoretical explorations into the characteristics and methodologies of translation. During that era, renowned translators of Buddhist sutras such as An Shigao, Zhiyan, Kumarashi, Dao An, etc., each possessed their own unique ideas regarding textual quality tendencies; these thoughts continue to be influential today and serve as key elements when investigating the origins of traditional Chinese translation discourse.

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thoughts continue to be influential today and serve as key elements when investigating the origins of traditional Chinese translation discourse.

Traditional Chinese translation discourse is an important part of Chinese translation studies, which covers the translation of Buddhist sutras from the late Han Dynasty to the Sui and Tang Dynasties to the contemporary translation thought and theory system. It can be seen that, to a large extent, the history of translation theory of Buddhist sutras with "Wen" and "Zhi" as the core meets our need to understand the history of traditional translation theory from this starting point; In the history of ancient Chinese translation, the question of "Wen" and "Zhi" have always been the core topic of translation. However, "Wen" and "Zhi" are general and vague relative concepts after all, so it is difficult to fully explain the complex translation phenomena and theories of different periods, and it is also unable to explain the different translation propositions of different generations of translators as different individuals. As a discipline, translation, like other things in society, is constantly evolving, and its theories and concepts are not and should not be limited to a specific period. In other words, stagnant translation ideas can not only adapt to the development of the new stage, but also can not solve the new translation problems emerging in each period. Therefore, the traditional Chinese translation theory began with "Wen" and "Zhi", and emerged with "faithfulness" and "beauty" as the core and end points in the long-term development process.

In conclusion, traditional Chinese translation theory, with its distinctive structural and theoretical framework, embodies inherent Chinese characteristics and is deeply rooted in traditional translation resources. Influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism due to its foundation in classical culture, the theory places great emphasis on the principles of "faithfulness" and "beauty" for translators as well as translation theories and practices. Therefore, it is imperative to delve into history and extract insights from the internal development trajectory of translation theory (Huang 16). This paper will study the concept of "Faithfulness" in Traditional Chinese Translation Discourse from the Perspective of the Wen-Zhi Debate. Additionally, by drawing from translation practices throughout different historical periods, this paper will explore the origin and development of the concept of "faithfulness" within traditional translation theory in its historical context, thereby elucidating its evolutionary trajectory.

### **3. The transition from unhewn translation to faithfulness: the development of the concept of "faithfulness" in traditional translation theory.**

Taking "Zhi" as the foundation, the development of "faithfulness", one of the key aspects in traditional Chinese translation theory, has undergone a complex yet uninterrupted journey, characterized by a distinct trajectory and a comprehensive process. The different stages of this developmental process are intricately interconnected, with its evolution marked by significant milestones such as unhewn translation, sincerity and fidelity, literal translation, similarity in form, and unmediated transparency between ST and TT.

#### *3.1. Unhewn translation: the origin of traditional Chinese translation discourse*

The concept of "Unhewn translation" is a summary of "Zhi" group in the late Han Dynasty and the Sui and Tang dynasties, which carries the essence and concept of "quality translation". Since the introduction of Buddhist sutras into China in the 2nd century AD, interlingual translation has gradually emerged, breaking the limitations of intralingual translation. The representative translators of Buddhist sutras during this period were mainly foreign missionaries who entered China from Central Asia through the Silk Road, such as An Shigao, Zhiyan, Dao An, Yancong, etc. Faced with difficult problems such as language barrier and cultural

differences, they adhere to the principle of “simple and complete translation without derogation”, which lays the foundation for the translation principle of “Unhewn translation”.

An Shigao was a master translator of Buddhist scriptures during the early period of translation, and he pioneered the principle of “Unhewn translation.” Dao'an referred to An Shigao as one who “values the original without embellishment, and prefers substance over style” (Zhu, Zhang, and Huang 3). An Shigao's lack of fluency in Chinese directly resulted in his inability to freely delete from the original text during translation, leading to translations that were overly simplistic and rigid. As a result, he adhered to the principle of “unhewn translation”. Following him, representatives of this approach included Zhi Chen, Dao'an, and Yan Cong. Zhizhe, as the first “pillar” among three pillars renowned throughout the world for their erudition, paved the way for faithful translation. Evaluations by scholars at that time and in later generations indicate his clear stance on faithful translation. Zhi Mindu's assessment of Zhi Chen was that he “valued practicality above all else and eschewed ornamentation” (Zhu and Zhu 161).

Dao'an also commented on Zhi Chen's translation, saying that he had “fully grasped the true meaning and did not add any embellishments”(Shi 10). As one of the representatives of the “Zhi” Group, Dao'an's translation thought also went through a development process. When he first arrived in Chang'an to take charge of translating Buddhist scriptures, he found various errors such as “loss of the original meaning” “loss of factuality” and “loss of intent”. Under such circumstances, he proposed the “five losses of the original meaning and three difficulties in translation” translation thought. Furthermore, his lack of knowledge of Sanskrit led him to have a very high respect for the original Buddhist texts, so he advocated maintaining the integrity of the original content in his translations, “advocating a straightforward and complete translation, and opposing deletion and embellishment in translation” (Fang and Zhuang 64). Later, Yan Cong, a highly supportive follower of Dao'an's translation ideas, gave a very high evaluation of Dao'an's “five losses of the original meaning and three difficulties in translation” thought and continued Dao'an's “eight preparations” theory to complete the basic framework of Buddhist translation theory. This shows that “unhewn translation” serve as an important starting point for traditional Chinese translation discourse by generally advocating preservation of the original language order and sentence structure, literal translation and phonetic translation, and opposing arbitrary deletion of the original text.

### *3.2. Sincerity and Fidelity: Enlightenment of traditional Chinese translation discourse*

Since the Opium War, particularly following the Sino-Japanese War, China was compelled to enter into numerous humiliating treaties that deprived the nation of its sovereignty. Chinese officials and intellectuals recognized the limitations of their own mindset and the imperative for modernization reform, prompting them to actively pursue advanced Western technology and embrace “Western learning”. Against this backdrop, a new wave of translation swept across China, with Yan Fu and Liang Qichao emerging as two prominent translators of this era.

Yan Fu's standard of “Faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” is a milestone in the history of Chinese translation theory and plays a role in connecting the past and the future. On the one hand, “Faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” is a summary of the Chinese translation experience of Buddhist classics in the past 900 years, and also a supplement to the early Chinese translation theories. On the other hand, it opened a new era in Chinese translation studies. Unlike Dao'an's “five basic losses” and “three difficulties”, Yan Fu's “Faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” does not merely abstractly summarize the difficulties of translation from objective facts, but sets a universal standard for judging the quality of translation that is still regarded today. As the standard of translation, the three words “faithfulness, elegance and elegance” are arranged in the order of priority. Yan Fu believes that faithfulness and faithfulness are interdependent and cannot be separated. “Faithfulness” refers to the translator's responsibility to the original text, and

“Expressiveness” refers to the translator’s responsibility to the target language readers. This elaboration of the dialectical relationship between faith and faithfulness shows his profound insight into the nature of translation, that is, although some translations can be unfaithful in order to be understood, no translation can be faithful but not easily understood by the reader. Later, Yan Fu used one word “Sincerity” to explain “faithfulness”. He regarded “sincerity” and “faithfulness” as two sides of the same body, and then summed up the translation concept of “sincerity and fidelity”. It is the second key node of the main line of “faithfulness”, which highly concentrates the translation thought in the late Qing Dynasty.

Liang Qichao, a proponent of Yan Fu’s theory, first linked text with free translation, quality with literal translation based on the principle of “sincerity and fidelity”. In this period, literal translation and free translation belong to the broad translation standards, and are not equivalent to the two translation methods understood by modern people. He once pointed out in *Translation Literature and Buddhist Scriptures*: “The problem of translation style is the gain or loss of literal translation and free translation.” Many of the examples he gives in this book are discussions about the quality of the translation of Buddhist sutras. Finally, he came to the conclusion that the “Zhi” translators preferred literal translation, but the “Wen” translators preferred free translation. Under the guidance of Liang Qichao’s point of view, the following practitioners of Buddhist sutra translation almost uniformly linked the quality of text with literal translation and free translation, and even regarded it as the same. This view is a continuation of the previous stage of qualitative translation in the late Qing Dynasty and a new development on the basis of criticism (Wang 65). At the same time, Liang Qichao’s practice of inheriting and developing Yan Fu’s theory of “sincerity and fidelity” with “literal translation” also laid a solid foundation for translators in the May Fourth period to debate the criterion of “similarity in form”.

### *3.3. Similarity in form: The prosperity of traditional Chinese translation discourse*

The literary translation work in the May Fourth Period in China gradually flourished, and the concepts of “literal translation” and “free translation” emerged accordingly. Among them, “literal translation” is the third development stage of the traditional translation theory line. “Similarity in form” is a concept summarized and concluded from the translation theories and standards of the May Fourth Period to the founding of the People’s Republic of China, as well as the essence of translation based on historical facts. In this stage, translators often reflected on their work, believing that direct translation should not distort the author’s intentions in the original text, causing readers to misunderstand the original, but should be faithful to the original to convey the essence of the original work. Under the guidance of this translation principle, most translators during this period, such as Liu Bannang, Fu Sinian, Lu Xun, and Mao Dun, advocated “literal translation”.

The translators in the May Fourth Period have been disputing the concept of “literal translation” put forward in the late Qing Dynasty. Lu Xun insisted on literal translation in his translation work. He even stressed that in order to preserve the language style and tone of the original text, the order of the words should not be changed. He advocated word-for-word translation and had to translate them sentence by sentence. Fu Sinian, the translator after him, believed that translators should be responsible for the author and the original work, and word-for-word translation was not easy to do, while word-for-sentence translation could be achieved. In 1921, Liu Bannong put forward the basic method of literal translation on this basis. Literal translation is not word-to-word translation, but also takes into account the meaning of the original text in the translation process, and tries to preserve the language mode of the original text (Chen 206). It can be seen that Liu Bannong’s “literal translation” takes into account the meaning and form of the translation, surpasses the word-for-sentence translation of Lu Xun and Fu Sinian, and lays a foundation for Mao Dun to enrich the connotation of “literal translation”.

In 1921, Mao Dun argued in *Discussion on the Method of Translating Literary Books* that “literal translation of translated literature is no longer imperative in contemporary times.” While Mao Dun acknowledges the significance of literal translation, he opposes its application to texts that are not comprehended, let alone endorsing “rigid translation” (Luo and Chen 408). He endeavors to attribute a positive connotation to “literal translation”, emphasizing that it should not be construed as an inflexible word-for-word rendition but rather one capable of preserving the original text's emotion and style without arbitrarily altering its wording. It can be observed that during the May Fourth Period, the concept of “literal translation” underwent evolution and incorporated certain elements of “free translation”, rectifying some translational disorder prevalent in the late Qing Dynasty.

### *3.4. Faithfulness: The pinnacle of traditional translation theory.*

With the deepening of the understanding of translation, in the middle and late 20th century, the development of “faithfulness”, the main line of traditional translation theory, gradually entered the fourth stage. At this stage, translators begin to evaluate and measure the fidelity of the translation from the effect of the translation. They no longer adhere to the definition of “faithfulness” by the translators of previous periods, and try to reveal its true nature. This is a further development of the main line of the traditional translation theory of “faithfulness”.

In 1944, Zhu Guangqian condensed Yan Fu's “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance”, and into the single term “faithfulness” in his book *Talk on Translation*. He emphasized that while most literary works can be translated, the translation can only approximate the original. Absolute 'faithfulness' is merely an ideal and difficult to achieve in reality (Luo and Chen 531).

In 1951, Fu Lei proposed the widely recognized theory of “spiritual resemblance”, suggesting that translation should build upon the essence of the original work through a new round of creative effort. As he stated, “Translating is harder than painting.” Temporary painting and original painting share the same materials and rules; however, translation differs from its source by following different principles (Xu, Song, and Hu 34). Therefore, it becomes evident that Fu Lei's concept of “spirit likeness” represents his concise summary of “faithfulness” at a level of translation aesthetics after years dedicated to artistic pursuit.

To sum up, in the Wen-Zhi Debate, the qualitative translation perspective has a significant impact on the main thread of traditional Chinese translation discourse “faithfulness”. Unhewn translation advocates that translation should focus on conveying accurate information, not arbitrarily deleting or changing the original text, and paying attention to the fidelity and accuracy of the translation result. As one of the main lines of traditional Chinese translation discourse, “faithfulness” emphasizes that translation should faithfully convey the meaning and information of the original text, and that the translation should be accurate, without deviation or omission. From the late Han Dynasty, Sui and Tang Dynasties to the modern and contemporary period after the May 4th Movement, from “unhewn translation” to “sincerity and fidelity” to “similarity in form” and then to “faithfulness”, the main thread of traditional translation theory has developed and advanced.

## **4. Conclusion**

This article, based on a review of traditional Chinese translation discourse, outlines the development of the main thread of “faithfulness” and analyzes the impact of the Wen-Zhi Debate on this main thread as well as its subsequent evolution in different historical periods. The development of the main thread of “faithfulness” in traditional Chinese translation discourse demonstrates that the influence of the Wen-Zhi Debate has been positive. Successive translators have inherited and developed important insights advocated by proponents of

unhewn translation, striving to maintain accuracy and fidelity in their translations. Furthermore, each stage has not been constrained by previous achievements but has instead supplemented and revised earlier proposals to better align with actual translation needs, increasingly emphasizing conveying the emotions and atmosphere of the original work. The evolving concept of “faithfulness” contributes to creating more diverse and high-quality translation works, better meeting readers’ needs for understanding and experiencing the original works.

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