



Translation as subversion and subjugation: Sándor Petőfi’s “Liberty and Love” in China

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Abstract

This paper considers a rare yet meaningful case of poetry translation where one historically well-circulated piece becomes identified with a native creation with the change of time. Upon introduction to a revolutionizing China, the renowned Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi’s poetry was celebrated as an exemplar of patriotic verse and was fervently accepted and reacted to as a resounding battle call. Efforts to introduce the poet’s works to Chinese readers were pioneered by the country’s progressive writers and leading intellectuals of the time under the auspices of renowned publishers. Since China embarked on its modernization journey, the motive of seeking historical relevance of literary works has been receding into the background, resulting in a dwindling zeal for revolution-themed works. Petőfi’s most widely memorized piece “Liberty and Love” started to receive alternative interpretations that gradually undermined its historical reading and obscured its genuine authorship, thus working to subvert and subjugate the original. Drawing from documented sources and published literature, the paper presents various Chinese translations of the famous lines and, in a comparative analysis, seeks possible explanations for the sweeping preference for a more domesticated yet less faithful version. To account for the changes in the interpretation and evaluation of the preferred translation, the paper then explores the linguistic factors that may have played a part in shaping the poem’s translation and reception among Chinese readers. In summarizing the major findings of the case study, the paper further reflects on the role of language in the translation of literary works and how it may serve to shape the landscape of world literature. This focused analysis aims to help demystify the Hungarian poet’s less well-understood popularity among Chinese readers. Going beyond the analysis of a particularistic case, the discussion offers implications for weaving the precious lines from minoritized languages into the rich tapestry of world literature.

Keywords Poetry translation · Hungarian · Chinese · Sándor Petőfi · “Liberty and Love”

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Introduction

In her uplifting interpretation of Shelley's well-known "the violet in the crucible" verdict on poetry translation, Susan Bassnett said:

It is absurd to consider subjecting a flower to scientific analysis to determine the basis of its scent and colour as it is to try and render a poem written in one language into another. But there is another way to read Shelley's very graphic description of the difficulties of the translation process. The imagery that he uses refers to change and new growth. It is not an imagery of loss and decay. He argues that though a poem cannot be transfused from one language to another, it can nevertheless be transplanted. The seed can be placed in new soil, for a new plant to develop. The task of the translator must then be to determine and locate that seed and to set about its transplantation. (Bassnett, 1998, p. 58)

Although Bassnett did not state explicitly what "a poetic seed" is or where to find it, she hinted at a cosmopolitan view of literature in general and of poetry in particular. That is, since poetry resides beyond the boundaries of nationalistic and ethnic affiliation, there would always be grounds to appeal to the shared humanity and sensibility, hence the *tertium comparationis*. In virtue of the inherent comparability of the poetics of world literature (Zhang, 2015, p. 7), some scholars would contend that there exists no insurmountable barrier across cultures and languages towards spreading the message of the poetic minds. In theory, theirs is an impeccable vision; in practice, however, challenges in poetry translation are real and may not be easy to face. Much as poetry translators may feel empowered by the life-giving metaphor of "transplanting a poetic seed," they may not feel as assured when confronting the mission of locating such a seed for successful transplantation. They need to be brave enough to undertake the challenge; as Árpád Göncz in his foreword to *In quest of the 'miracle stag': The poetry of Hungary* notes, "To write poetry is an act of daring. [...] To translate poetry is sheer audacity" (Makkai, 2000, p. ix). They also need to be skilful, strategic, and creative, for their work is not meant for mundane purposes of communication, but for engaging readers in "an intellectual and an emotional exercise" (Bassnett, 1998, p. 65). Likewise, poetry translation can also be rendered as a "relaying" practice during which translators may feel the need to "create a poem in the target language which is readable and enjoyable as an independent, literary text" (Jones, 2011, p. 169). This line of conceptualizations of poetry translation as a movement or transfer may lead us to wonder whether or to what extent a translated poem could do justice to the original if it is seen as a creation in its own right. Could it be possible that the translation diverges so markedly from the source text that it functions to 'subvert' the original? And in some extreme cases, could the translation 'subjugate' the original by eroding the genuine authorship or claiming authorship of its own?

This paper presents a case of poetry translation that provides evidence for such 'subversion' and 'subjugation.' When first brought to China, the Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi's works were hailed for their patriotic zeal and were accepted and

responded to with comparable passion. The endeavour to introduce the poet to the Chinese public was initiated by the country's leading writers and intellectuals with the support of renowned publishers. Among the poet's introduced works, one short piece entitled "Liberty and Love" was memorized and loved by the masses. However, with the change of time, new, alternative interpretations arose, reducing this historical credo to a popular proverb-like saying with obscured authorship, thus subverting and subjugating the original work.

Inspired by Kenesei's (2010) translation-linguistic approach towards poetry translation with a focus on reader reception, this paper seeks to unpack the enigmatic popularity of Sándor Petőfi's most memorized lines "Liberty and Love" among Chinese readers from a diachronic perspective. It starts with a brief review of the history of introducing Petőfi's works to China. Then it focuses on the poet's well-known piece "Liberty and Love" and its various Chinese translations attempted upon introduction. In a comparative light, the textual analysis intends to explain the predominant preference for a more domesticated yet less faithful version. Following the analysis, the reception of this favoured translation among contemporary Chinese readers is examined based on internet search queries and survey data. The results are discussed with a focus on the role of language in the shaping of the translation and its reception.

Meet the hero: Chinese readers' first encounter with Petőfi

Despite the geopolitical and cultural distance, Chinese readers' encounter with the Hungarian poet was no accident. The encounter occurred during the last days of the Qing dynasty (1636–1912) when the country was jeopardized by foreign invasion. To boost the morale of the masses to fight against foreign aggressors and seek liberty and independence, a number of writers were introduced to the country for the highly appreciated patriotic ethos of their works. Among these introduced writers was Hungary's national poet Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849). Petőfi's poetry was said to be first brought into China by the country's revolutionary humanistic writer Lu Xun (1881–1936), along with the works of Russian writers Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov and Polish author Adam Bernard Mickiewicz (Jin & Daisaku, 2013). Lu was recorded to have incorporated an introduction to the poet with a brief life account in one piece of writing in 1907 (Sun, 1957, p. 26).

Sun Yong (1902–1983), a great translator and a Lu Xun scholar, pioneered the introduction of the poet to the Chinese public and academia. Sun first published his translation of Petőfi's folk epic "John the Valiant" (*János vitéz*) in 1931 with *Hufeng shuju* (Lake Wind Press) (Petőfi, 1931). The first collection of Petőfi's translated poems (Petőfi, 1940) was published in June 1940 by a local publisher *Shi shidai she* (Poetry Times Press) (Qu, 2014, 019), later known as *Shidai chubanshe* (Times Publishing House). The translator was named Qin Zihao (1912–1963), a modern Chinese poet and poetry critic who also wrote patriotic poems. The publications came out at a time when the country was deep in the war against the invading Japanese forces, and its people were suffering from the horrors of the war and the deficiencies of life-supporting resources. Due to a lack of available materials, crude recycled

paper was used for printing, and the collection was condensed to 57 pages. The collection's white cover featured the illustration of two slim-figured and haggard-looking Chinese soldiers who were marching decidedly forward carrying long guns on their backs (*ibid.*). In the translator's preface to the collection, Qin explained his intention to translate the poet's work: "His fiery lines burned into the hearts of Hungarian people [...] I believe that great poets such as Petőfi need to be introduced to readers at this very moment when China is under the assault of Japanese enemies" (qtd. Qu, 2014, 019, originally in Chinese, translation mine). Noticeably, these two earlier publications still used traditional Chinese characters, whereas later publications preferred the simplified script to suit a modern readership.

Over the following years, more published translations came out. The most distinguishable and influential ones were attributed to Sun Yong and Xing Wansheng, who were publicly known, among other titles, as *the* translators of Petőfi. Following his incipient translation of "John the Valiant," Sun published a selection of Petőfi's poems in 1954 with *Zhongguo zuojia chubanshe* (China Writer Press), a national publisher devoted to literature publishing (Petőfi, 1954). In 1996, a collection translated by Xing Wansheng, who was among the precursors to introduce and translate the poet's works (Xing, 1981; Petőfi, 1982), was published by *Renmin wenxue chubanshe* (People's Literature Publishing House), the country's leading literary book publisher (Petőfi, 1996). In 2006, an autobiographical account of the poet compiled by Feng Zhisheng (1935) was published by another major literary work publisher—*Waiguo wenxue chubanshe* (Foreign Literature Publishing House) (Feng, 2006). Two re-edited collections translated by Xing Wansheng were later added to the stock: *Peiduofoei shuqingshi 60 shou* (60 lyrical poems by Petőfi, 2008) and *Peiduofoei shige jingxuan* (*An exclusive selection of Petőfi's poems*) (Petőfi, 2010).

Upon its introduction to China, Petőfi's poetry was passionately received, acting as a battle call for Chinese people to devote themselves to fighting for the country's liberation and independence. With regard to the translators' efforts, there was no lack of evidence suggesting that the "transplantation" was a phenomenal success. For instance, it was recorded that during the Long March, some Red Army soldiers wrote the poet's inspiring lines onto each other's clothes and read them aloud as a way to raise morale (Chen, 2012, p. 60). Equally fervent favour of the poet and his works was expressed among the intelligentsia. Most famously known is Lu Xun's straightforward articulation of affection when he confessed, "I've always been very fond of Sándor Petőfi and his poems" (qtd. Xing, 1981, p. 4, originally in Chinese, translation mine). The famous Chinese writer Mao Dun (1896–1981) also wrote favourably about the poet, "Petőfi is a Hungarian patriotic poet and a national poet of Hungary. His poems are extraordinary; his character and his life are also extraordinary! [...] He lived at a time of the political resurrection when everyone had enormous hopes for the future. In the vortex of the era of 'new ideals,' he acted as both a recorder of the spirit of the era and a guide" (qtd. Ge, 1980, p. 80, originally in Chinese, literal translation mine).

High praises as such could be frequently read in the scholarly discourse at that time. To idolize the poet as a heroic figure endowed with keen foresight could work to create a personal cult. During the founding years of the country, many saw the inspirational poet as a source of belief and strength, which they could draw upon

to restore a sense of orientation amidst the messy and bewildering efforts towards restoring individual and social order. For instance, the well-known Russian literature translator Ge Baoquan (1913–2000), who introduced Alexander Pushkin's works to China, recalled his excitement upon reading Petőfi and his enduring friendship with Xing Wansheng during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), which resulted from the turbulent politics of the Mao era:

It was in May 1949 after I attended the first World Congress of Peace Partisans held in Prague. I was on my train journey back to China. The train travelled through Siberia, and I got off at Chita to transfer. In a bookstore there, I accidentally discovered a collection of Petőfi's poems – the 1948 edition, which was the poet's first publication in the Soviet Union. I was beyond myself with joy at that time and bought it immediately. [...] Then it was towards the end of 1959 when Xing Wansheng went back from Hungary and came to visit me. [...] Both as big fans of Petőfi, we had common topics the first time we met and had since then been learning from and helping each other. [...] I remember Xing would carry Petőfi's works and translations around in his bag wherever he went – in socialist education and exercise during the Down to the Countryside Movement [...] He did not stop working on translating and studying Petőfi even during the decade-long upheaval when the Gang of Four prevailed. (Ge, 1980, p. 81, 83, originally in Chinese, translation mine)

The evidence so far presented showcases the vitality of the poetic seed upon transplantation into the Chinese soil, for it evoked the intended patriotic passion among both the intellectuals and the general public. As China embarked on its modernization journey after the founding of the nation in 1949, institutional support and intervention have been provided to maintain the influence of the poet's work, as the well-known "Liberty and Love" credo has been included in the middle-school textbook of Chinese language and literacy used nationwide (Meng & Hajdu, 2018, p. 118). The effect of making the patriotic lines part of the compulsory education curriculum seemed obvious, at least during the early stage of development when the historical sentiments of patriotism still prevailed.

In China, anyone who has attended middle school would be able to learn Petőfi's "Liberty and Love" by heart. Someone has conducted a test by asking people to write from memory a foreign poem they knew. The participants who attempted to write the translated pieces by Shelley, Heine, Goethe, or Pushkin mostly failed to write out the entire poem. However, over half of those who attempted to write Petőfi's translated piece "Liberty and Love" successfully did so. (Chen, 2012, p. 59, originally in Chinese, translation mine)

In the age of turbulence and deficiency, generations of Chinese fought hard for long years to found the nation, yet the arduous battle also turned out to be a spiritually fulfilling one. In times of war and conflicts, the need to attach to a sense of belonging and unity became immediate. Patriotic sentiments seemed to be at the highest and the most unyielding when there arose a collective yearning for liberty and independence. Those with relatable experiences who have thus come to reckon

the nationalistic values would be able to derive strength from the lines inspired by similar sentiments.

Long live “Liberty and Love”: Petőfi’s most beloved lines among Chinese readers

Though his substantial longer poems were favourably received among Chinese readers, Petőfi’s most well-known lines in China are found in the piece entitled “Liberty and Love” (*Szabadság, szerelem*), which is read rather as a motto or credo than an individual poem in the original Hungarian context of publication (Meng & Hajdu, 2018, p. 119). As a report in *Daily News Hungary* reveals, “This poem is still very popular among the citizens of the Asian superpower, millions of Chinese learn it by heart during their school years” (Woods, 2019). The original lines in Hungarian are as follows (English translation by O. F. Cushing):

- 1 Szabadság, szerelem!
Liberty and love
- 2 E kettő kell nekem.
These two I must have.
- 3 Szerelmemért föláldozom
For my love I’ll sacrifice
- 4 Az életet,
My life.
- 5 Szabadságért föláldozom
For liberty I’ll sacrifice
- 6 Szerelmemet.
My love.

Many attempts have been made over time to translate this poem into Chinese; the earliest one is popularly attributed to Lu Xun’s younger brother, Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967), who rendered the piece in archaic Chinese. This translation was published in a collected volume of *Tianyi bao* (*Tianyi Newspaper*) in 1907 (Chen, 2012, p. 59). The 24-character verse¹ reads as follows:

¹ The Chinese translations are presented with a word-for-word English gloss. To illustrate the character arrangement patterns in the classical-style verses, the characters within a multi-character word are separated using hyphens, e.g., *zi-you* (liberty).

- 1 歡樂自由,
Huan-le zi-you,
joy liberty
- 2 爲百物先;
wei bai-wu xian;
is all first
- 3 吾以愛故,
Wu yi ai gu,
I for love sake
- 4 不惜舍身;
bu xi she shen;
not care forsake life
- 5 並樂獨愛,
Bing le juan ai,
forsake joy forsake love
- 6 爲自由也。
wei zi-you ye.
for liberty sake

The use of archaic Chinese gives Zhou's translation a distinctively elegant style. These six lines form a text that resembles the *pianwen* [駢文] ("parallel prose") genre, also known as *siliuwen* [四六文] ("four/six-character prose") genre in classical Chinese literature. Arranged in segments of four or six characters, a *pianwen*-styled text is characterized by structural parallelism and rhythmic balance and is known for its flamboyance and exquisiteness (Luo, 2018, p. 131). However, moulding the poet's message into neat four-character chunks while maintaining its logical flow does not seem to be easy. This dilemma arises because the traditional *pianwen* style generally discourages intensive use of explicit logical connectors (e.g., 以...故 in Line 3; 爲...也 in Line 6), which are more frequently used in its opposite genre style known as *sanwen* [散文] ("free prose"). For a typical *pianwen*-styled text, the rhetorical force is thought to be created by the parallel form *per se*, and the intensive use of logical connectors could spoil the parallel structures, thus disrupting the *wenqi* [文氣] ("literary pneuma") of the literary text (Gu, 2020). As a result, this translation may sound somewhat quaint and bizarre to modern readers whose efforts to understand the poem can be further deterred by the wording with archaic characters such as 獨 in Line 5, which is rarely used in contemporary writing.

In his centennial tribute essay to Petőfi published in *Xiaoshuo yuebao* (*Short-Story Monthly*) in 1923, Mao Dun inserted his translation of the poem, which was alleged to be a re-translation based on John Browning's English rendering of the original (Chen, 2012, p. 59).

- 1 我壹生最寶貴:
Wo yi-sheng zui baogui:
my one-life most precious:
- 2 戀愛與自由。
Lian-ai yu zi-you.
love and liberty
- 3 爲了戀愛的緣故,
Wei-le lian-ai de yuan-gu,
for love 's sake
- 4 生命可以舍去;
sheng-ming ke-yi she-qu;
life can forsake
- 5 但爲了自由的緣故,
dan wei-le zi-you de yuan-gu,
but for liberty 's sake
- 6 我將歡歡喜喜地把戀愛舍去。
wo jiang huan-huan-xi-xi di ba lian-ai she-qu.
I will merrily love forsake

In contrast to the archaicity of Zhou's translation, Mao's version adopts a modern *xinshi* [新詩] ("new-poetry") style, which relaxes the constraints on the number of characters in each line and the rhyming pattern (Zhao, 2014). This allowed flexibility made it possible to convey subtle meaning nuances with linguistic units, which would be razed if rendered into a more restrictive style. For instance, Line 3 and Line 5 share the same structure "爲了...的緣故" (for...sake), yet Line 5 has an additional character 但 (but) which signals for a slight turn of tone. Line 6, which extends noticeably longer than the preceding lines, includes an adverbial modifier of a *diezi* [疊字] ("replicated-character") style: "歡歡喜喜地" (merrily). Both these additions seem to have no correspondences in the original Hungarian lines (Line 3 "Szerelmémért föláldozom" Line 5 "Szabadságért föláldozom"). One possible reason for this glaring discrepancy is that the translation was based on a translated rather than the original text. In Browning's translation entitled "Motto," which reads: "All other things above / Are liberty and love; / Life would I gladly tender / For love; yet joyfully / Would love itself surrender / For liberty" (Wang, 2006, p. 62), the "yet joyfully" might have inspired the insertion of the additional characters.

Equally noticeably, Mao's version renders "love" into a disyllabic word 戀愛, which in modern Chinese specifies romantic love between man and woman in a relationship. The decision to adopt such a hyponymic concept could be attributed to the rule of *yinyun hexie* [音韻和諧] ("rhythmic harmony"), a latent constraint on the construction of Chinese lexicon, which has been held as resulting from the overall trend of *shuangyinhua* [雙音化] ("disyllabication") in modern Chinese (Zhuang et al., 2018). In light of this rule, a monosyllabic 愛 fails to pair harmoniously with the disyllabic word 自由 in a coordination structure connected by 與 (and) in Line

2 and thus the validity of the disyllabic derivation 戀愛 is confirmed. In this regard, an alternative derivation 愛情, with a slightly higher degree of formality and a more inclusive meaning,² appears to have been preferred by other translators. For instance, Sun's translation reads as follows:

- 1 自由, 愛情!
Zi-you, ai-qing!
liberty love
- 2 我要的就是這兩樣。
Wo yao de jiu-shi zhe liang-yang.
I want exactly are these two
- 3 爲了愛情,
Wei-le ai-qing,
for love
- 4 我犧牲我的生命;
wo xi-sheng wo-de sheng-ming;
I sacrifice my life
- 5 爲了自由,
Wei-le ziyou,
for liberty
- 6 我又將愛情犧牲。
wo you jiang ai-qing xi-sheng.
I again *will love sacrifice

Sun's translation goes closer to the original by following both its form and meaning. Instead of rearranging the lines (e.g., Lines 1 and 2 of Mao's version appear in a reversed order to the original) for a more natural reading, it sticks to the original sequence and structure. In terms of faithfulness, Sun's translation seems 'perfect' except for one suspected defect. That is, Line 6 contains a potential ambiguity caused by the polysemous character 將 (future-tense marker; object-introducer), which might be distractive to readers. Since the character 將 is preceded by the character 又 (again), they two tend to be readily processed as one lexical chunk, which predicts a future reoccurrence of a specific act or event. However, this combinational reading is cancelled after reading the full line when it becomes clear that the character 將 connects more strongly to the subsequent lexical unit 愛情 (love) than the preceding one. Hence, for a more sensible reading, the character shall be taken as an object marker in formal-styled writing (Sun, 1996, p. 60). Therefore, instead of forecasting a repeated act, it does little more than labelling love as the object of the sacrificing act.

² The Chinese word “愛情” refers to affection and romantic love, typically in a romantic relationship between man and woman. While “戀愛” is more often used to indicate mutual affection, the feeling suggested by “愛情” is not necessarily mutual, and may refer to one's desire of a relationship.

The other ‘professional’ translation was contributed by Xing Wansheng, who, during the 1950s, was studying the Hungarian language in Budapest (Dudášová, 2016, p. 129). Xing devoted much of his career to the introduction and translation of Hungarian literature. In a commentary on Petőfi’s works, Xing recounted his attempts to translate the Hungarian poem. He first experimented with the classical style yet found it less satisfactory. With the belief that the classical verse style would ‘damage’ the original poem in some way, he used a new method: first translate the original Hungarian poem word-for-word into a Chinese prose and then adapt the prose into a poem (Xing, 1990, p. 290). Xing’s translation of the credo reads as follows:

- 1 自由與愛情!
Zi-you yu ai-qing!
Liberty and love
- 2 我都爲之傾心。
Wo dou wei zhi qing-xin.
I both for it desire
- 3 爲了愛情,
Wei-le ai-qing,
For love
- 4 我寧願犧牲生命,
Wo ning-yuan xi-sheng sheng-ming;
I would rather sacrifice life
- 5 爲了自由,
Wei-le zi-you,
For liberty
- 6 我寧願犧牲愛情。
Wo ning-yuan xi-sheng ai-qing.
I would rather sacrifice love

In comparison with the other versions, Xing’s translation seems to be the most faithful to the original in terms of content and format. The only diction that might arouse a slight difference in tone is the emphatic pre-verb 寧願 (would rather) used to modify the act of sacrifice in Lines 4 and 6. Apart from clarifying a personal choice, the word carries with it a negative shade of meaning in modern Chinese, i.e., make a choice after weighing pros and cons in a less satisfying condition. It is often used in contexts where the subject is confronted with two equally harsh options, and opting for one would be similar to choosing the lesser of two evils. Though sacrificing life and love could be assumed as painful choices, the poet’s subtle emotions towards making such choices are not explicitly expressed in the original lines. Hence Xing’s translation might sound more ‘emotional’ than the original.

Despite the aforementioned and other alternative attempts to render “Liberty and Love” into Chinese, the household fame of the poem is attributed to one particular version. The translator is generally believed to be a Chinese poet named Yin Fu (1910–1931). Sharing both a passion for poetry and a short yet turbulent life, Yin

resonated with Petőfi and rendered his credo lines using a classical *geliushi* [格律詩] (“regulated verse”) format, a poetic form known for its constraints on rhyme, tonal patterns, and parallelism in form and meaning (Zhu, 2019, p. 19).

- 1 生命誠寶貴,
Sheng-ming cheng bao-gui,
life really precious
- 2 愛情價更高;
ai-qing jia geng gao;
love value more high
- 3 若為自由故,
Ruo wei zi-you gu,
if for liberty sake
- 4 二者皆可拋!
er-zhe jie ke pao!
two both can forsake

- 1 生命誠寶貴,
Sheng-ming cheng bao-gui,
life really preciouslife really precious
- 2 愛情價更高;
ai-qing jia geng gao;
love value more high
- 3 若為自由故,
Ruo wei zi-you gu,
if for liberty sake
- 4 二者皆可拋!

er-zhe jie ke pao!
two both can forsake

Distinctive from the other discussed versions, Yin’s translation consists of four lines rather than six.³ This apparent divergence from the original may be attributable to the alleged fact that Yin referred to the German translation by Alfred Teniers rather than the original Hungarian text (Chen, 2012, p. 60). Other formal characteristics of this version are its line length and rhythmic pattern. Similar to Zhou’s four-character-per-line version, Yin’s includes five characters in each line to form a neat format as required by the *geliushi* style. Moreover, Yin’s version features end-rhyme at Line 2 (*gao*) and 4 (*pao*), whereas most of the other translators did not seem to intend to use rhymes (Zhou’s version has a unified line length yet does not rhyme). By contrast, the original Hungarian lines sound nice with a rhyming scheme similar

³ In the original translation, the four lines form a classical-style verse with no punctuations in between the lines. The punctuations were recorded to have been added by Lu Xun in his editing of the translation (Chen, 2012, p. 60).

to *aabcbc*. Although Yin may not have this in mind when translating from the non-Hungarian text, his version could have served to retain the musical quality of the original piece. Nevertheless, restoring the poetic aura in a foreign tongue is challenging, especially in one that “abounds in good rhymes” (Gömöri, 1986, p. 408). Since there is a perceptible difference between rhyming of monosyllabic characters at the end of evenly distributed lines and that of lexically stressed syllabic combinations, the recomposed musicality in the constructed Chinese verse echoes the original only in a symbolic way.

Thanks to these formal characteristics, when compared with the other Chinese translations, Yin’s version looks more regulated, reads more pleasantly, and overall resembles more closely a Chinese poem. However, the ‘Chineseness’ which the poem achieves may have come at a price of accuracy, as when checked against the original lines, there seem to be discrepancies in the meaning of the texts. To some extent, the logic that underlies the original text seems to get deconstructed and reconstructed in the translation. In the original poem, the poet first presents the two things that he values—liberty and love. Then he examines each in turn before arriving at an order of significance: life is to be sacrificed for love; love is to be sacrificed for liberty; hence liberty comes before love, and love comes before life. In the translation, however, the narrator starts with life and compares it with love, then after deciding that love triumphs over life, he compares both to liberty and declares that both are to be forsaken for liberty’s sake. Although readers are likely to generate from the translation an identical order of significance, the way this order is negotiated and presented in the original and the translated texts differs. By treating the key notions separately and in order, the poet might have conveyed a less transparent message which can be easily dismissed by less careful readers. For example, the original order of mention seems to put the notion of life in the background, thus implying its comparatively lesser significance. The poet does not seem to be as strongly attached to the idea either, as the poem opens with a declaration that liberty and love are the two precious treasures of the poet. Therefore, the poem could be interpreted as being meant to illuminate a scenario where one is torn between equally strong commitments to love and liberty, both of which transcend life itself. The translated poem, by contrast, opens with a line praising the value of life, which may distract the focus intended in the original credo.

Gone is the author: new understandings and interpretations of the old credo

As China hastened into a new era of rapid development, the plant which the poetic seed has sprouted into started to show signs of ‘transmutation’ as the famous credo increasingly received new understandings and interpretations that tended to subvert its patriotic value at birth. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the following post on a news media site quoted the poet’s golden lines in suggestions to the public on quarantine.

The great Hungarian poet Petőfi says, “Liberty and love; / These two I must have. / For my love I’ll sacrifice my life. / For liberty, I’ll sacrifice / my love.” [Yin’s version]. However, the temporary loss of liberty from quarantine is better than the (extended) loss of liberty if you get infected by the virus.⁴

The intended humour of the quotation notwithstanding, the author alluded to a narrowed-down meaning of “liberty,” retreating to the word’s basic sense concerning the mobility individuals enjoy that is constrained by the pandemic situation. In another excerpt, the author went even farther to improvise on the original lines by adding three extra:

The full text of a short poem “Liberty and Love” written by Hungarian poet Petőfi in 1847 reads: “Liberty and love; / These two I must have. / For my love I’ll sacrifice my life. / For liberty, I’ll sacrifice / my love. [Yin’s version] Once you sacrifice the two, you’ll understand / if you sacrifice life, / you won’t be able to find love.”⁵

The author of the above post quoted the poet’s lines in a seriously-toned discussion where humour was not intended. Worryingly, the author referred to the edited lines in the form of an accredited source, with the title of the poem, nationality and name of the poet, and the year of composition. In the edited version, the three added lines “*pao hou fang zhi-xiao, ru ruo mei sheng-ming, ai-qing na-li zhao*” (Once you sacrifice the two, you’ll understand / if you sacrifice life, / you won’t be able to find love) follows the classical verse style and includes end-rhymes in alternate lines. Though awkward in meaning, this addition flows naturally from the original in sound and format, thus beguiling and misleading to uninformed readers. The source of this doctored quotation remains unidentified; nevertheless, it offers evidence for the popularity of Yin’s translation, which may have inspired unwarranted adaptations.

⁴ The excerpt was taken from a post published on *Baidu Baijiahao* (a popular blog-style platform used for news posting and information sharing) on 9 March, 2020. The post was entitled “*Xinguan bingdu laixi, laowai ye fengle*” (“When COVID-19 hits, foreigners have also gone ‘crazy’”). The original post was written in Chinese. The English translation is mine.

⁵ The excerpt was taken from a post published on *Baidu Baijiahao* on 18 September, 2020. The post was entitled “*Shengming cheng ke gui, aiqing jia geng gao*” (the first two lines of Yin’s translation). The original post was written in Chinese. The English translation is mine.

Despite the apparent misreading and misrepresentation, the two examples above credit the authorship of the original credo. This acknowledging practice is not commonly observed, however. More often than not, the quote appears with the absence of accredited authorship. Some include such preceding phrases as *suhuashuo* (it is said that...) and *youyandao* (there is a saying that...), which are suggestive of a popular proverb. Below are a few recent examples⁶ collected from journalistic and social media sources:

[Yin's version]. It is a pity that many young people today have been influenced too much by this idea to the degree that it has eroded the traditional orthodoxy of our great Chinese culture. (local news report)

[Yin's version]. On 28 July, a man surnamed Xia from Xiantao was arrested by Dawu policy on suspicion of theft. After being arrested, Xia claimed that he had stolen multiple times just to return to prison. (local news report)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Western public has fully demonstrated the meaning of [Yin's version]. Now, even the most severely infected United States of America has not enforced the wearing of masks. (international news report)

It is said [Yin's version]. Perhaps the so-called 'liberty' means that we can choose to do something and not to do something with dignity. (movie review)

There is a saying that [Yin's version]. Between liberty and life, Chen Guo's choice is correct, for she finally chose to live for herself. (manga review)

In these and many other examples of the quoted verse circulating across modern Chinese media sites today, the patriotic message in the original poem is found to be replaced by superficial and partial reading, and in some cases, interpretations that are distorting and misguided. For instance, the first excerpt above used the quoted poem as its news headline. The news was about a boy who committed suicide due to an emotional breakdown. The news author quoted the lines to criticize its negative influence on the younger generation, for it has "eroded" the traditional values upheld by the country.

For a snapshot look at how Chinese readers today would possibly respond to the poem, I surveyed 38 translation major undergraduate students at an eastern coastal university in China, which enjoys a reputation for its foreign language degree programmes. The participants were in their third year in the programme and were around 20 years of age. Being trained for careers in translation between English and Chinese and cross-cultural communication, the students had been closely engaged in reading literature and had demonstrated their knowledge and skill in a pre-survey on how they normally read a poem and what impressed them as the most memorable lines. Presumably, these students would be considered more 'knowledgeable' than

⁶ The excerpts were originally in Chinese. The English translation is mine. Due to space limit, the quoted lines in the examples are replaced by "[Yin's version]," indicating that the original text contains the full text of Yin's translation of "Liberty and Love" yet with no further information (e.g., name of the author, name of the translator) attached.

the average Chinese readers due to their speciality background, thus more likely to know the poem and its history and origin.

In the survey, students were presented Yin's translated version of "Liberty and Love" and were asked whether they knew the poem before the survey. Those who gave a positive answer were asked to describe from memory their first-reading experience of the poem. Afterwards, students were asked whether they considered it an original Chinese poem or a translated foreign poem. After the survey, students were told that the text which they were asked for a judgement about was a Chinese translation of what was originally written in Hungarian. Apart from being shown the Hungarian script, students also listened to an audio recording of the lines read in Hungarian. After being told the 'truth' about the poem, students were invited to share their interpretations and comments.

An analysis of the survey results suggests that Yin's translated version had stood the test of time for all the students confirmed that they 'knew' the poem prior to the survey. However, only two out of the 38 students managed to recognize the poem as written by Petőfi. Most of the other students took it for granted as a native poem and accepted this popular perception with little doubt. Few were suspicious and bothered to check the authorship of the poem. Some of the representative feedbacks are:

Student A: I knew the poem. The first time I heard it was when my high school classmate used it to make fun of himself. Honestly, *I did not know it was a translation*. I thought it was a popular joke on the Internet.

Student B: I knew the poem, but *I took it for one originally written in Chinese*. The first time I heard it was when my middle school Chinese teacher quoted it in class when explaining the famous advertisement "A diamond is forever." I think the poem can be read in two ways. If read in the context of the 'old society,' it expresses an urge to seek liberty and independence and self-sacrifice. If read in the context of modern society, it expresses the urge of some people to break free from earthly constraints and live a carefree and enjoyable life.

Student C: I knew the poem was very famous. I first read it in primary school, but *I didn't know it was a translation*. Perhaps the background of this poem is that the poet faced a dilemma in which he had to choose among the three things. If he chose one, he might lose the other two. I think the poet chose liberty or something that symbolizes it and that he was willing to sacrifice (his life and love) for his choice.

Student D: I knew the poem by accident. I heard it in a TV series when I was in middle school. *I had no idea at all that it was actually a translation*. It was only until later that I did some search and found that it was written by Sándor Petőfi and translated by Yin Fu. (original interview scripts in Chinese, translation and emphasis mine)

Not knowing the Hungarian language, the students were surprised at the 'genuine' original poem when reading and listening to the Hungarian lines and used a range of adjectives to describe their impressions, including "different," "amazing," "special," "extraordinary," and "exotic." Limited as the survey finding was, it nonetheless suggests that the translation, which has subverted the original by compromising its form

and meaning, could subjugate the original by acquiring a new identity as conceived and promoted by the target audience.

Generations after the country's liberty fighters empowered themselves with pursuits fuelled by poetic inspirations, the Chinese younger readership today, though still quite familiar with the lyrics of the old battle song, seems to have been drifting away from the sentiments and experiences associated with the lines which once helped sustain the hopes of their predecessors.

Subversion and subjugation: the role of language

The analysis so far explained how "Liberty and Love" were translated and, in particular, how one specific version was circulated and received among Chinese readers over time. There seems to be evidence that the message of the original credo lines has been subverted to varying degrees in its modern reinterpretations and may have been subjugated by acquiring new authorship and identity with the unknowing readers. One question remains to be answered: why did this happen? The following discussion explores the factors that may have shaped the translation and its reception in this particular case.

To begin with, at the centre of the translation practice is language, which could have its literary, intellectual, creative, and artistic manifestations in the genre of poetry. To do justice to the source-language text while taking care of the target-language rules calls for efforts to ease and negotiate the differences between systems. In this case, the Chinese language differs from Hungarian in some obvious ways that may pose a technical challenge to translators. Chinese essentially operates with monosyllabic characters as basic units. Although in modern Chinese, characters combine to form strings that carry a relatively fixed meaning, they remain lexically unbound and operate in ways that may not be fully captured by the westernized notion of "word." In contrast, as an agglutinating language, Hungarian relies on its strong morphological system to form meaning combinations, resulting in extended lexical constructions. That is perhaps why to an amateur Chinese reader, the original Hungarian text does not look very much like a poem, as the six-line piece is merely made up of 13 'words' in the sense of a textual unit delineated by spacing. Among the six lines, four consist of two 'words,' the rest containing four and one respectively. Its minimalistic structure notwithstanding, the meaning conveyed by each unit is rich and would take multiple Chinese characters to interpret. It thus does not seem technically very likely to seek formal 'equivalence' between the two languages, hence a need for adaptive and possibly creative negotiation and compromise. Nevertheless, since there is sometimes a fine line between being creative and being subversive, a translation has the potential to overwrite the original by its own ingenious design.

In addition to language-specific features, the task to translate between two genetically distant languages can be made more daunting by the distance in literary traditions, aesthetic values, and rhetorical preferences that build around languages. Among the various translated versions of "Liberty and Love," Yin's translation wins Chinese readers over mainly because of its unique style, as the classical verse style

creates a sense of familiarity or an illusion of a native poem. This may suggest a general public preference for the classical style, at least with regard to poetry appreciation. A relatable observation was made by Klein (2017), who noticed that the default reading for “Chinese poetry” is “classical Chinese poetry” and that the former is often used to the exclusion of modern Chinese poetry in English-language scholarly publications. With regard to the public favour of poetic style and, more generally, readers’ aesthetic and rhetorical preferences, there seems to be a competition between the ‘old’ and the ‘new.’ In the analysis above, it is noticed that the other less well-known versions mostly adopted a free verse style without constrained line lengths and rhymes. These translations were produced at a time when Chinese poets started to embrace the new, liberating style of writing poetry. Some started their career as “new poetry” writers using the *baihua* [白話] (“vernacular literary language”) by first translating foreign poems (Zhao, 2014, p. 132). Though this trend could have ushered in a new era of modern poetry, public acceptance of the emerging sub-genre tended to be lukewarm, with the majority clinging nostalgically to the poetic tradition that runs deep (Ding, 2010, p. 10). The lasting glamour of the classical verse continues to amaze modern Chinese readers who may find the regulated format and strict rhymes idiomatically appealing, culturally authentic, pleasant to the ear, and easy to memory.

Another issue that draws attention to itself in the analysis of the different Chinese versions of the credo is the translator’s proficiency in the source language, which provides direct access to the original text. Only one (Xing’s version) of the five translations under discussion was confirmed to have referred to the original Hungarian text, while the others⁷ were reported to have been based on existing translations in other languages, including English (Mao’s version), German (Yin’s version), and Chinese (Sun’s version). This may seem to be a handy solution to inadequate language proficiency. However, the translator may run the risk of unknowingly making a ‘mistake’ by faithfully following a less accurate second-hand source, as discrepancies that arise in the referenced translation may remain or get enlarged in the ‘re-translation.’ For instance, both the added information in Mao’s version and the altered format in Yin’s version can be attributed to the secondary texts their translations were based on.

At the time when these translations came out, China was only beginning to open itself to the world. It is therefore easy to assume that translators back then generally lacked proficiency in a foreign language that was largely ‘unknown’ to the public. Since most translators were unable to access the Hungarian language, they had to resort to medium languages which they had studied and which they were more familiar with. For example, Qin, translator of the 1940 collection of Petőfi’s poems, was reported to have selected and translated the 25 short poems in the collection from a Japanese version of Petőfi’s poetry collection (Qu, 2014, 019). This can be

⁷ Due to a lack of documented details, the source of Zhou’s version remains unclear. Since there was no record of Zhou’s learning experience or knowledge of Hungarian in scholarly publications or autobiographical resources, it is assumed that Zhou might also have referred to a non-Hungarian source while translating the piece.

thought of as a ‘relaying’ practice that takes place not directly between the original and the target text in two systems but indirectly between the original and the medium text and between the medium and the target text across three or even more systems. This process is subject to a multitude of influences involving language-based features and translator’s proficiency and style, which is more complex than the influences involved in direct communication between two systems. This lack of immediacy could lead to subversion in a less blatant manner. That is, it is possible that the original work can be overthrown by an unadventurous translator in the target system, who has no idea that the real rebel is probably some other translator in another system. Alternatively, the subversion could also be the result of accumulated divergences that occur in the relaying. If the translator was considered more or less responsible for the subversion, the readers then conspired to secure the life of the translation somewhat unknowingly. That is, the uninitiated average readers were unable to judge the translator’s work due to a general lack of knowledge about and experience with foreign languages. This may remind us of Lefevere’s observation on the Chinese way of translation:

When Chinese translates texts produced by Others outside its boundaries, it translates these texts in order to replace them, pure and simple. The translations take the place of the originals. They function as the originals in the culture to the extent that the originals disappear behind the translations, not least because many of those who participated in Chinese culture did not know the language or languages of the original, which made it very difficult indeed even to check what the translators were actually doing. (Lefevere, 1998, p. 14)

Lefevere’s sweeping and lopsided claims notwithstanding, he explicitly addresses the issue of “language,” which has often been treated coyly in translation studies. This negligence could have stemmed from an integrated view that language serves as an intrinsic property of the text rather than a potent factor in its own right. With increasing communication with the world outside and opportunities to gain multi-lingual experiences, Chinese readers today are in a much better position than their predecessors to evaluate the translator’s work. Apart from commenting and critiquing the translations, some readers would venture their own versions to compete with the professional. Then why would the misinformation about the poem prevail? Why would readers willingly subscribe to the flawed understandings? How come the unplotted subversion turned into a subjugation?

Aside from the enduring lure of an ingeniously crafted translation, there seems to be a practical reason for the popularization of the ill-informed understanding, which is the lack of popularization of the Hungarian language. Even to this day, Hungarian, together with other *xiaoyuzhong* (“minor foreign languages”)⁸, is taught only

⁸ In the Chinese context, the “minor foreign languages” generally refer to foreign language varieties with less communicative reach than the *lingua franca* English, which is widely taught in schools nationwide as the default “majority foreign language.” In terms of professional training, academic degrees in English and non-English varieties with higher international prestige or local relevance (e.g., French, German, Spanish, Japanese, Korean, Russian) are offered in a greater number of undergraduate programmes than degrees in less locally acknowledged or relevant varieties (e.g., Portuguese, Ukrainian, Arabic, Burmese, Hausa, Swahili), which are offered only in a very small number of schools specializing in foreign lan-

in a handful of foreign language universities⁹ in China. The general lack of learning resources and motivation to study the famously intimidating language¹⁰ may have also contributed to the prevailing misunderstanding caused by a shared lack of knowledge. Although increasing mobility of the population and exchanges between cultures have offered various avenues for mutual understanding, with 'minoritized' cultures, translation may continue to serve as an essentially exclusive way of knowing the Other. Hence the translator is solemnly tasked with providing access to the foreign text, and as such, bringing a world of unexplored wonder into the horizon of domestic readers. On the other hand, the public's general inability to assess the accuracy and reliability of the translator's work lends unchallenged authority and absolute determinacy to the translated text, making it possible for overwhelmingly popular versions to take over the original.

Conclusion

The current discussion illustrates the possibility that translation may subvert the original by imposing a beguiling veneer of nativeness on the source text. The unintended subversion could lead to subjugation with the popularization of the translated text in the domestic context, which is relatively detached from the source language and culture. In the case of the Hungarian poem "Liberty and Love," the Chinese public's stubborn preference for a less faithful translation by a less famous translator brings us back to the theoretical question of what a "poetic seed" is and how to make a successful "transplantation" in poetry translation. Upon introduction, such a "seed" could be identified with shared patriotic sentiments and revolutionary zeal among the general public in the source and the target system. The "transplantation" was an immediate success as the translated credo worked to boost the public morale during turbulent times, leaving readers in awe of the poet's heroic glory. However, the impact of the credo on its readership has changed over time against the changing domestic and international landscape of language and literature. The transplanted seed has sprouted into a new plant that thrives in foreign soil to such an extent that it has even acquired a new, native identity. This metaphorical transformation is reminiscent of the Chinese idiom *ju sheng huainan ze wei ju, sheng yu huaibei ze wei zhi* ("Oranges born in Huainan are oranges, while those born in Huaibei are oranges (of a different kind)"), suggesting that a change in environment may induce changes in

Footnote 8 (continued)

guages. In this context, Hungarian is half-jokingly referred to as an "extremely minor foreign language" by Chinese students who major in Hungarian.

⁹ China's first professional training programme in Hungarian was launched in 1961 by Beijing Foreign Studies University. Despite its decades-long history of personnel training, the country's Hungarian major graduates today remain very small in number and thus could exert but a limited influence on promoting the recognition and acknowledgement of the Hungarian language, culture, and people among the Chinese public.

¹⁰ The Hungarian language has a reputation for being difficult to learn. For example, Internet quips such as "Only Hungarians and God can speak the Hungarian language" have been making the rounds. Though such beliefs are largely impressionistic than proven, they can inadvertently dampen learners' motivation.

the fruit grown from the same seed. As evidenced in the analysis of the media and survey data, the alternative readings of the translated “Liberty and Love” poem in modern Chinese culture point to an overall tendency towards a partial, superficial, practical, or even vulgarized interpretation of the original credo. Typical distortions include shifting the emphasis of the poem on hailing the value of life (as in the sense of bare survival), taking “liberty” at face value, and romanticizing the scene where the poem is placed. Dampened or missing in all these emerging interpretations is the revolutionary passion that once burned in the bosoms of many who fought courageously for freeing the country from foreign invasion.

Moreover, as the study of reception entails the study of culture (Kershaw & Saldanha, 2013, p. 143), the changes in Chinese readers’ reception of Petőfi’s credo can be taken as evidence for a cultural tendency as the public’s interest in seeking historical relevance of revolution-themed literary works wears away with emerging interests and preferences. Critical reflections on these changes may help capture and review some of the subtle yet profound changes the culture system is undergoing.

Taken together, this line of discussion offers an updated reflection on the factors that influence the shaping of translated poetry and a productive supplement to text-based hermeneutics. It argues for the relevance of a diachronic, reader-focused approach in assessing the acceptance of translated literature. This approach builds on the belief that reading a translated work is a situated practice for the individual reader is situated in and constantly interacts with the broader sociocultural context where the reading takes place. The effect of a translated work cannot be adequately assessed without considering acceptance of and reaction to the translation over an extended time period. Hence, a dynamic and pluralistic view in the discussion of the spread, acceptance, and impact of world literature could be more enabling and rewarding.

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