

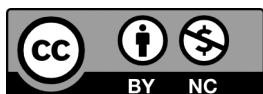
A Study on Translator's Subjectivity in Poetry Translation Guided by Skopos Theory

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Abstract: This study investigates the manifestation of the translator's subjectivity in Zheng Zhenduo's Chinese rendition of Tagore's *Stray Birds* through the lens of Skopos Theory. Situating the translation practice within the New Culture Movement of the 1920s, the research examines how Zheng's "enlightenment-oriented" translation purpose shaped his strategic choices. Textual analysis reveals three key dimensions: Firstly, Zheng localized cultural imagery and reconstructed prosodic patterns to align with vernacular modernization. Secondly, his subjectivity manifested in dynamically balancing fidelity and creativity, preserving Tagore's pantheistic essence while employing cultural adaptation through omission/amplification. Thirdly, Zheng's dual identity as a translator-editor engendered ideological intervention through paratextual framing. The study demonstrates how translator subjectivity under Skopos's Theory facilitated literary canon reconstruction, offering fresh perspectives for modern translation historiography.

Keywords: Translator's subjectivity; Skopos Theory; Cultural adaptation; New Culture Movement



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1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Rabindranath Tagore, revered as India's preeminent poetic luminary and the first Asian laureate of the Nobel Prize in Literature, stands as an iconic figure in Eastern literature. His works profoundly embody the pursuit of spiritual freedom, the advocacy for egalitarian ideals, and a trenchant critique of feudal systems, exerting extensive and enduring influence across Asia and globally. In China's modern literary evolution, his impact has been particularly pivotal (Yue, 2020). *Stray Birds*, a philosophical poetry collection first published in 1916, comprises 325 untitled short poems. The collection is structured in two parts: one features Tagore's self-translated English renditions of his Bengali poems from *Kanika (Fragments)*, while the other includes English verses composed spontaneously during his 1916 visit to Japan. These concise poems, often spanning merely a line or two, capture ephemeral natural scenes or distill profound

truths. With acute perceptiveness and lyrical mastery, Tagore crystallizes fragments of life's reflections, emotions, and meditations. In his works, a bird, a flower, or a star becomes imbued with human essence. The poet, unwavering in his fidelity to thought, reveals profound insights into nature and society alongside an adept articulation of the psyche's complexities. Though seemingly fragmented, these minimalist verses harbor layered meanings, rich intellectual depth, and a refreshingly fluid yet hauntingly beautiful aesthetic.

The inaugural Chinese translation of *Stray Birds* was undertaken by Zheng Zhenduo, a foundational figure of the May Fourth New Literature Movement and co-founder of the Literary Research Society. Advocating a literary ideology of "breaking the old to establish the new," Zheng insisted that literature should shoulder modernized missions. Consequently, he actively translated foreign literary masterpieces, including collaborative translations of Tagore's poems with Wang Jing in 1921. In 1922, Zheng's selected translations of *Stray Birds* emerged in China, marking a systematic endeavor in his pursuit of ideological liberation and independent literary translation. This act planted seeds of freedom and love within China's intellectual circles, then fervently seeking new literary and philosophical paradigms. By 1956, Zheng had completed the full translation, which remains a canonical reference even after 96 years. Despite subsequent retranslations by others, Zheng's version continues to enjoy unparalleled academic and popular acclaim in China. The collection's reverence for nature, cosmic contemplations, and existential epiphanies have resonated across generations of Chinese literary youth, profoundly influencing luminaries such as Liu Bannong, Lu Xun, Qu Qiubai, Xu Zhimo, and Bing Xin. In her later years, Bing Xin reflected: "Reading Zheng Zhenduo's translation of Tagore's *Stray Birds*, I was struck by the liberated brevity of those poems... I emulated that freestyle, jotting down my thoughts and memories in terse phrases." This acknowledgment not only underscores the enduring resonance of Tagore's original but also celebrates Zheng's translational artistry. It was this inspiration of "concise expression" that later gave birth to Bing Xin's seminal works *Myriad Stars* and *Spring Water*.

1.2 Research Purpose and Significance

This paper, from the perspective of Skopos Theory, will deeply analyze Zheng Zhenduo's translation of Tagore's *Stray Birds* regarding strategies, methods, and style. It focuses on his translator's subjectivity and its far-reaching impact on the translation. This analysis offers new cases and viewpoints for Skopos's Theory in poetry translation, aiding in theoretical exploration and practical methodology. Under Skopos's Theory, the translator's subjectivity helps balance the original poem's characteristics and target language readers' needs, bridging literary works and target culture. Studying Zheng's translation of *Stray Birds* within Skopos Theory deepens our understanding of translation theory, offers new perspectives, expands research methods, promotes literary exchanges, and enhances Chinese poetry translation, providing fresh angles for literary criticism.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Translator's Subjectivity

In the 1970s, Translation Studies experienced a remarkable "cultural turn", which laid the foundation for the emergence of the Cultural School of translation theory, with its core focus on the target - language and cultural context

of the translator. This theoretical trend opened up a brand-new dimension for translation research. With the rise of the cultural turn, translator-related studies quickly became a focus in academia and also sparked extensive discussions and in-depth exploration of translator's subjectivity. Xu Jun once explicitly stated that a "translator's subject consciousness" manifests as a self-aware personality consciousness and a creative consciousness in translation activities (Xu, 2003). Yang Wuneng, considered one of the earliest translation theorists to propose translation subjectivity, emphasized that translation is primarily a human activity and that conveying the original work's content is also a literary creative act (Yang, 1987).

Based on Antoine Berman's insights, we can understand how the translator's personal attitudes, translation methods, and stances jointly shape their unique position in the translation. As the most active element in the translation process, the translator's motives, purposes, stances, plans, and methods largely determine their role in translation, making every translated word a form of commitment (Berman, 1995). Zha Jianming and Tian Yu defined a translator's subjectivity as the translator's subjective initiative in achieving the translation purpose based on respect for the translation object. Its main features involve the translation of the subject's self-awareness, personality, cultural literacy, and aesthetic creativity (Zha & Tian, 2003).

The concept of the translator's subjectivity highlights the translator's identity as an independent individual in translation practice. They exist in a social and cultural environment entirely different from that of the original author, carrying their own rich life experiences and profound, unique understanding of social reality. This subjective understanding, stemming from personal background, inevitably permeates the translation, manifesting as the translator's subjective initiative. Overall, the translator's exercise of subjectivity leads to diverse interpretations of the same literary work by different translators. From this perspective, by comparing and analyzing translators' purposes, we can delve into their translation strategies for the same literary text and gain a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the crucial role and broad influence of the translator's subjectivity in the translation process.

2.2 Skopos Theory

Skopos Theory is a core part of German functionalist translation theory. First systematically expounded by Hans Vermeer in his 1970s book *Framework for a General Translation Theory*, it is a key pillar of this theoretical system. It reveals that the core driving force of translation behavior comes from the translation purpose itself; that is, translation is not an isolated process of language conversion but a complex behavior driven and guided by the translation purpose. According to Skopos's Theory, the source text mainly serves as an information provider in translation, while the predetermined purpose of the target text in a specific context is the key factor in choosing the translation strategy.

Skopos's Theory is built on three essential principles:

Skopos Principle: The primary and fundamental principle guiding all translation practice. The ultimate purpose of translation shapes every aspect of the translation process. Reiss defined translation as "a purposeful action," a "complex activity to achieve a specific purpose" (Reiss, 2013), meaning translators must consider the target - language context and create a coherent text for the audience.

Coherence Principle: The translation should be coherent in the target - language, culture, and context, ensuring clarity and acceptability for readers. This highlights the readability and cultural adaptation of translations, aiming for smooth information transfer.

Fidelity Principle: The translation should be faithful to the original text linguistically, maintaining semantic

connections to convey similar meanings and information across contexts.

Since its inception, Skopos Theory has prompted deep reflection in translation studies, moving research beyond mere linguistic analysis. Researchers now focus on external factors like the translator's intent, cultural background, and ideology, broadening the scope of translation research. This shift transcends traditional linguistics, advancing translation studies to a more integrated and interdisciplinary level.

3 Skopos's Theory and Translator's Subjectivity

3.1 The Embodiment of Translator's Subjectivity in Skopos Theory

From the perspective of Skopos's Theory, translation, a human behavior based on certain purposes, is influenced by the target - language's cultural context (Nord, 2001). In this purpose-oriented practice, translators are in a complex web of subjective and objective factors. They need to exercise their subjectivity while considering objective constraints, carefully selecting translation materials, devising strategies, and meeting target-text readers' needs. Skopos's Theory guides translators, making their subjectivity an integral part of the translation process.

The Skopos principle, central to Skopos Theory, states that translation is driven by specific communication purposes. Translators' actions, strategies, and outcomes all serve this purpose, fully reflecting their subjectivity and ensuring the translation's effectiveness.

In practice, translators have subjective initiative despite external constraints like sponsors. However, their subjectivity is debated, especially regarding its boundaries and the complex issue of inter-subjectivity. Realist critics question how to define these aspects in translation.

Under Skopos's Theory, translators consider objective conditions such as target readers' needs, cultural background, and ideology when producing their translations. Their personal purposefulness is crucial as these factors' influence depends on their subjective judgment, making this stage key for exercising subjectivity.

Translator's subjectivity refers to their role as independent thinkers and actors in translation. Living in different environments from the original authors, they have unique experiences and knowledge. These differences lead to a personalized understanding of the source text, which is reflected in the translation, showing strong subjectivity.

3.2 Zheng Zhenduo's Translational Purposes

Zheng Zhenduo was born in 1898 in Wenzhou, Zhejiang, an early treaty port, where he was exposed to progressive Western ideas from childhood. Despite initial family prosperity, his grandfather's and father's deaths led to decline, forcing him into a life of displacement. This experience gave him insight into the hardships of the common people.

In his youth, Zheng met like-minded friends like Qu Qiubai and Xu Dishan, whose interactions helped shape his thinking. During the May Fourth Movement, he actively participated in cultural activities, founded journals, and became a key promoter of the New Culture Movement. Around the May Thirtieth Movement, he supported revolutionaries like Li Dazhao and contributed to literary theory and creation, advancing Chinese literature.

Zheng was deeply committed to his country and nation, dedicating his energy to literature. His love for Tagore's poetry began with *The Crescent Moon*, leading him to write *Tagore's View of Art*, laying a theoretical foundation for

translating and spreading Tagore's works, and opening new avenues for Sino - Indian literary exchange.

In the preface to his translation of Tagore's *Stray Birds*, Zheng openly expressed his love for Tagore's poetry and confidence in conveying its charm. His translation activities stemmed not only from his admiration for Tagore but also from his translation theories published around 1920. These theories revealed his purpose of translating Russian literary works to fuel China's new literature. In the first issue of the reformed *Xiaoshuo Yuebao* (*Fiction Monthly*), Zheng emphasized introducing world literary masterpieces as a key mission for Chinese literary workers, vital for broadening literary horizons and advancing modern Chinese literature. This reflected his strong sense of responsibility for introducing world literature. Chen Fukang noted in *On Zheng Zhenduo* that Zheng's translation purpose was clear from the start and became more so over time.

When translating *Stray Birds*, Zheng took on the mission of introducing Indian literary gems to China. Considering his era and life experiences, his act of introducing world literature had deeper aims: to expand Chinese writers' perspectives, stimulate innovation, modernize Chinese literature, enhance dialogue with world literature, and secure China's place in the global literary landscape. His translations were not just reproductions of Tagore's works but enrichments of Chinese literature and bridges for international literary exchange.

4 A Study of Translator's Subjectivity in Zheng Zhenduo's Translation of *Stray Birds* under Skopos Theory

Analyzing Zheng Zhenduo's personal journey, era, and translation critiques reveals his translation philosophy, which impacts his subjectivity in translation practice. This chapter explores how Skopos's Theory explains his subjectivity in translation strategies, techniques, and characteristics, using *Stray Birds* as a case.

4.1 Translation Strategy Selection

In translation, participants are the "source text author" and "target text receiver." Strategies are categorized as foreignization or domestication based on the translator's orientation. The translator's subjectivity under Skopos's Theory significantly influences strategy selection.

Foreignization, per Schleiermacher, means the translator doesn't interfere with the original author but guides readers to approach them. This strategy expands the target language's expression, enriches its culture, and offers exotic experiences, enhancing cross-cultural understanding. Domestication, however, prioritizes reader comprehension, presenting the original author to readers in a natural way, making the translation more accessible, and meeting specific target-reader needs.

Zheng Zhenduo aimed to introduce world literature to China to boost Chinese literature, aligning with foreignization's benefits. He respected the original author, helping Chinese readers understand their ideas and cultural context. Though his translations had Chinese-style expressions, they were generally foreignized to preserve the original work's style and cultural connotations.

In summary, Zheng's translation purpose shaped his strategy, making him focus on respecting the original author and presenting cultural differences. This highlighted his full exercise of subjectivity in translation practice.

Example 1

ST: The birth and death of the leaves are the rapid whirls of the eddy whose wider circles move slowly among stars.

TT: 绿叶的生与死乃是旋风的急骤的旋转，它的更广大的旋转的圈子乃是在天上繁星之间徐缓的转动。

ST: I think of other ages that floated upon the stream of life and love and death and are forgotten, and I feel the freedom of passing away.

TT: 我想起了浮泛在生与爱与死的川流上的许多别的时代，以及这些时代之被遗忘，我便感觉到离开尘世的自由了。

Zheng Zhenduo's two translations effectively convey the original text's basic meaning. Yet, on-the-ground reading of the translated text reveals some awkward expressions. For instance, “旋风急速旋转的姿态” (“the posture of the whirlwind's rapid rotation”), “其更为广阔的旋转轨迹” (“its more extensive rotational trajectory”), and “漂浮于生命、爱情与死亡洪流之上的其他时代” (“other eras floating above the torrent of life, love, and death”) use several pre - modifiers and the possessive particle “的”, which, although accurately conveying meaning, affect the text's flow, giving it a pronounced foreignized flavor.

Example 2

ST: “Moon, for what do you wait?”

“To salute the sun for whom I must make way.”

TT: “月儿呀，你在等候什么呢？”

“要致敬意于我必须给他让路的太阳。”

ST: This longing is for the one who is felt in the dark but not seen in the day.

TT: 这个渴望是为了那个在黑夜里感觉得到、在大白天里却看不见的人。

The translations of these two poems by Zheng Zhenduo accurately reproduce the original meanings. However, when handling two relative-clause sentences, Zheng opts for premodification in both cases. Examples include “must give way to the sun” and “the person who is perceptible in the dark night but invisible in broad daylight”. Especially the second sentence, with its long premodified attributive, is not only hard to read but also strongly alienated, not matching the reading habits of Chinese readers.

Example 3

ST: I feel thy beauty, dark night, like that of the loved woman when she has put out the lamp.

TT: 黑夜呀，我感觉得你的美了，你的美如一个可爱的妇人，当她把灯灭了的时候。

In handling the temporal adverbial clause, Zheng Zhenduo didn't follow the Chinese habit of placing “when she put out the light” before the action. He translated “when” simply as “当 ... 的时候”. This obviously shows his choice of foreignization strategy, allowing readers to feel the unique color of foreign literature.

4.2 The Use of Translation Methods

Translation methods, means, and steps adopted to fulfill a specific translational purpose based on chosen strategies are greatly influenced by the translator's personal emotions and aesthetic preferences, making the translation method the

result of the translator's subjective decisions to achieve the translation goal and align with the chosen strategy.

When using a foreign-oriented strategy, translators can use diverse methods like zero translation, transliteration, literal translation, and the literal translation strategy. These aim to faithfully convey the original author's intent and ideas. In contrast, domestication prefers free translation, imitation, adaptation, and creative translation to meet the target audience's needs. As mentioned earlier, Zheng Zhenduo used foreign-oriented strategies, and his personal purpose significantly influenced his method choices.

Zheng's translation goal was to introduce Tagore and his works to invigorate Chinese literature. His deep respect for Tagore led him to focus on preserving the original style, preferring literal translation. This choice honored Tagore and aligned with Zheng's mission of promoting Sino-foreign literary exchange, determining the translation's stylistic structure.

On a deeper level, Zheng's preference for literal translation stemmed from the complex social and cultural environment of the time. During the May Fourth and New Culture Movements, Evan-Zohar's view that translation should actively participate in shaping new cultural patterns was relevant. This shift demanded that translators be innovative, moving beyond domestic literary norms. Thus, translations became more faithful to the original, introducing new elements to the target culture. Zheng's choice of literal translation for the poetry collection was influenced by this background.

Example 4

ST: It is the tears of the earth that keep her smiles in bloom.

TT: 是大地的泪点，使她的微笑保持着青春不谢

ST: I thank thee that I am none of the wheels of power, but I am one with the living creatures that are crushed by it.

TT: 谢谢上帝，我不是一个权力的轮子，而是被压在这轮下的活人之一。

In translating the two poems, Zheng Zhenduo used a literal approach for "tears of the earth" and "wheels of power", rendering them as "大地的泪点" and "权力的轮子". He didn't interpret their meanings, instead preserving the original poetic flavor and allowing readers more room for understanding and imagination.

Example 5

ST: God grows weary of great kingdoms but never of little flowers.

TT: 上帝对于大帝国会生厌，却决不会厌恶那小小的花朵。

Zheng Zhenduo translated "great kingdoms" as "大" instead of using an adjective matching "帝国". While "大" contrasts with the subsequent "小小", the combination "大帝国" is awkward. This reflects Zheng's simple and direct literal translation method.

4.3 The Manifestation of Translation Style

The manifestation of translation style lies in the translator's understanding of the original work and their choice of expression, influenced by the original's literary characteristics and the translator's personal aesthetics and literary views. Tagore, with his rich experience in prose-poem creation, believed that poetic form is just the external shell, not the core content. This philosophy made his poetry collections free and unconventional, with distinct prose traits.

When translating this unique poetry collection, Zheng Zhenduo adhered to the principle of respecting the original. He aimed to restore its language and emotion through his translation, bringing the form and content closer to Tagore's creative intent. Zheng favored keeping the original's prose-like language, focusing on conveying its literary charm and emotional depth. To better achieve this, he used short sentences, which not only captured the poetic essence but also aligned with the original's writing style.

Zheng's word and sentence choices reflected his deep understanding and respect for Tagore's literary style. Through this translation practice, he successfully delivered the original's emotion and artistic conception to readers, making the translation not just a simple language replacement but a continuation and recreation of the original's literary value. This translation style shows the translator's profound insight into literary creation and high regard for the original work.

Example 6

ST: O Beauty, find thyself in love, not in the flattery of thy mirror.

TT: 啊，美呀，在爱中找你自己吧，不要到你镜子的谄谀中去找呀。

ST: "How far are you from me, O Fruit?"

"I am hidden in your heart, O Flower."

TT: “你离我有多少远呢，果实呀？”

“我是藏在你的心里呢，花呀。”

ST: Tiny grass, your steps are small, but you possess the earth under your tread.

TT: 小草呀，你的足步虽小，但是你拥有你足下的土地。

By closely reading the three poems above, it is evident that Zheng Zhenduo took great care in his translation process. He maintained the original poetic style, preserving its prose-like language and infusing it with profound meaning and lasting charm. This made the translation consistent with the original in style, without forced emphasis on literary devices or rhyme. As a result, his translation is more expressive and emotionally rich.

In terms of layout, Zheng's published translations exhibit a unique style. Unlike most modern poetry with line breaks, Zheng's versions abandon this format, using punctuation to separate sentences instead. This mirrors Tagore's original form, showing respect and fidelity to the original work. It makes the translation visually closer to the original and conveys reverence for literary traditions.

Overall, Zheng's translations not only restore the original style but also respect the original form in layout. This consistent approach faithfully conveys the realm and emotion of Tagore's poetry, offering readers a rich cross-linguistic literary experience.

5 Conclusion

5.1 The Development of Previous Studies

Comparing Zheng Zhenduo's and Feng Tang's translations of *Stray Birds* reveals the evolution of translation styles across eras and the impact of translators' choices. This analysis deepens our understanding of past research, especially

how individual and historical factors interact in translation.

Firstly, the translation process is influenced by the translator's era. Zheng's 1950s translation was marked by limited international exchanges, prompting him to adapt to Chinese readers' cultural backgrounds. In contrast, Feng's translation emerged in a globalized, open society, allowing him to seek broader international resonance. This historical context shapes their grasp of Tagore's essence and their translation strategies.

Secondly, language style is crucial in translation. It affects how the original's emotional tone and expressiveness are conveyed and how the target audience receives and appreciates the work. Translators must carefully consider the original's language style, adapting it to the target language's cultural context and expression habits to achieve stylistic consistency. Zheng's translation retains Tagore's prose style and philosophical nature, while Feng's focuses on phonetic and poetic expression, highlighting rhythm and meter. These choices reflect their personal aesthetics and shape the translated text's uniqueness.

Finally, reader feedback is key to evaluating translation effectiveness. Zheng's version was highly praised for its faithful representation of Tagore's ideas, whereas Feng's garnered international attention, particularly among English-speaking audiences. This shows how a translator's purpose and focus on specific reader groups influence the translation's reception.

In summary, comparing different translations of *Stray Birds* highlights the translator's pivotal role. This not only offers new insights into past research but also provides rich examples of translation diversity across times, cultures, and contexts.

5.2 Practical Implications

Skopos's Theory offers a fresh angle for studying a translator's subjectivity, enriching our understanding of translation. It liberates translation from traditional thoughts, helping us grasp the translator's central role and its decisive impact on the process. As the key player in translation, the translator has the freedom to pick strategies and methods based on their understanding of the original text, the translation purpose, and the target audience's needs, ensuring the translation is faithful to the source and suits the target language's conventions.

Skopos's Theory underscores the translator's active role, enabling them to use personal judgment to shape the translation. This active involvement is crucial for the translation's success. By exploring the translator's subjectivity, we can better understand their decision-making on strategies, methods, and style and how these choices affect the final translation. In literary translation, especially poetry, the translator's aesthetic judgment is vital. Poetry translation demands capturing the original's emotions, imagery, and cultural essence. Skopos's Theory helps analyze why translators focus on specific phonetics, rhythm, or poetic expression.

In summary, Skopos's Theory deepens our understanding of the translator's subjectivity, offering a theoretical basis for translation assessment. This insight is valuable for training creative and flexible translators in practice and education.

5.3 Limitations

Skopos Theory offers a new angle for studying a translator's subjectivity, yet it isn't the only or exclusive way to analyze this concept.

In this study, despite an in-depth analysis of the translator's subjectivity from the Skopos Theory perspective, limitations exist due to the research period, the researcher's energy, professional boundaries, and data availability. These

may lead to an incomplete or superficial understanding of the translator's subjectivity. Future research should adopt broader theoretical and empirical approaches for richer and more accurate conclusions.

Firstly, this study is just a preliminary exploration of the translator's subjectivity under Skopos Theory, with some non-academic views that need further refinement. Secondly, it only looks at the translator's subjectivity one-sidedly, neglecting inter-subjectivity and passivity, and thus lacks a holistic view of the translator's subjectivity.

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