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# An Inquiry into Yan Fu's Translation Theory of Faithfulness, Expressiveness, and Elegance: The Beginning of China's Modern Translation Theory

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## I. Introduction

In China's history, there were three high tides of translation. The first was a large scale translation of Buddhist Scriptures from the Eastern Han Dynasty from the beginning of AD 1 to Tang and Song Dynasties. The second was the translation of Western ideas from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the May Fourth Movement. The third is the current one from after liberation of the mainland to the age of the Internet. In history, Chinese translators have regarded translation as a cultural cause while translating between Sanskrit and Chinese, English and Chinese, and Chinese and other languages. In order to promote the exchange and mutual learning of Chinese and foreign cultures, translators have been engaged in the exploration and study of translation theories. Yan Fu [嚴復] and Lin Shu [林紓] are known as the best translators in China in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively. As a master of translation, Yan Fu translated Western thought, totaling 1.7 million words, into Chinese. In addition, he introduced, in his Chinese version of *Evolution and Ethics* [天演論], the translation standard of “faithfulness [信], expressiveness [達], and elegance [雅],” which is so incisive that it is acclaimed as the essential principle of modern Chinese translation theory and is still very influential. This paper will make an inquiry into the meaning and value of this standard so as to illustrate the continuity of translation theories.

## II. The Origin

Yan Fu (1854–1921), original name Zong Guang and original courtesy name You Ling, both of which were later changed into Fu and Ji Dao

respectively, was born in Houguan (now called Fuzhou), Fujian Province. In 1877, he began studying at the Navy Academy in Greenwich, England sponsored by the government of the Qing Dynasty as one of the first Chinese overseas students and graduated with honor as a straight A student two and a half years later. Upon his return to China, he became a teacher at Majiang Arsenal School in Fuzhou. In 1880 when Li Hongzhang [李鴻章] established the Beiyang Naval Academy in Tianjin, he was appointed dean and later promoted to superintendent of the academy. In 1905 he assumed the office of the head teacher of Wanjiang Middle School. On May 15, 1912, following the Xinhai Revolution, the Imperial University of Peking was renamed National Peking University, and Yan Fu was appointed its first president.

In the late Qing Dynasty, when the nation's survival was hanging in the balance, Yan Fu published 5 political essays: "On the Speed of World Change," "On Strength," "Refutation of Han Yu," "On Strength II," and "On Our Salvation" from Feb. 4 to May 1, 1885 in the *Zhibao* newspaper of Tianjin. These essays, all calling for reform, were filled with controversial words and ideas which made his name. Through "On Strength," the Chinese were exposed to Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* and the theory of evolution for the first time. This article also introduced the theory of the survival of the fittest of Herbert Spencer, a British social scientist, and set forth his ideas on saving the nation. Yan Fu strenuously studied the similarities and differences in Chinese and Western thought to explore the way to wealth and power. As a result, he translated British biologist Huxley's work, *Evolution and Ethics*. The Chinese edition was printed in the *National News* [國聞匯編] of Tianjin in Dec. 1897 and was formally published the following year. It sold very well and was reprinted many times. Kang Youwei (1858–1927), a leader of reformists, hailed Yan Fu as "the number one scholar on Western studies in China" after reading the translation.

Yan stated in the preface to his translation of *Evolution and Ethics* that "there are three difficulties in translation: faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance," (13) which were later regarded as general standards for translation and standards for any good translation. Over time, there have been new interpretations to the three words, which are so essential and incisive that they are hard to surpass. It is just like what the great poet Li Bai (701–62) said under the "Yellow Crane Tower [黃鶴樓]" a seven-character-per-line regular verse by Cui Hao [崔顥] (704–54), a poet of Tang Dynasty, that "before my eyes is a beautiful scenery that I cannot express." The poem, applauded as the

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best verse of Tang, goes as follows.

The ancient one flew off on his yellow crane,  
Now this place is empty and only the  
Yellow Crane Tower remains.  
The Yellow Crane once gone, never returns,  
White clouds remain empty and remote for a thousand years.  
Boats and Hanyang trees reflect in the clear water,  
Lush vegetation thrives on Parrot Shoal.  
At dusk I ask for news of home,  
These mist shrouded waters lay heavy on my heart.  
(translated by the author)

昔人已乘白雲去，  
此地空餘黃鶴樓。  
黃鶴一去不復返，  
白雲千載空悠悠。  
晴川歷歷漢陽樹，  
芳草萋萋鸚鵡洲。  
日暮鄉關何處是，  
煙波江上使人愁。

Cui Hao started the poem with the fairytale of Zi'an flying off on the back of a yellow crane, a story which connected the past with reality. The poem, infused with deep feelings and sentiments, is extremely enchanting. Anecdote has it that Li Bai once ascended the Yellow Crane Tower, but left without having been able to compose anything—reduced to unwilling silence by Cui's poem inscribed conspicuously on the tower's wall, because his poem could not match that of Cui Hao. In the same vein, I am trying to interpret the meaning of "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance" so as to make an objective judgment of modern Chinese translation theories.

### III. The Meaning

To quote Yan Fu in the preface to *Evolution and Ethics*:

“British philosopher John Stuart Mill said, one cannot understand a country’s language so as to understand the profound thought of the country without mastering a few languages. I doubted these words at first, but now I am fully convinced of it as a constant truth. This logic applies not only to translators who spread a country’s language, but also to the ancient sages who devoted their lives to the study of knowledge and told great truth through concise language. When there is an enlightenment, it is either a thought when it is not expressed or a statement when it is expressed or written down. So all these philosophies got their names and were recorded and passed on for a reason. It is not a coincidence.” (10, translated by the author)

Therefore, we know that the focus of Yan Fu’s translation is the profound truth in foreign words. Words are only the surface, whereas the essence lies in the great truth hidden in concise language, the outcome of lifelong efforts: This is the value of translation, and that is why these words are recorded and passed on. Master monk Fa Yun [法雲] of the Song Dynasty wrote in *Collection of Translation Concepts* [翻譯名義集], “To translate is to change, to explain that you do not have what you have” (20). Translation is making changes to convey differences, to find the invariable meaning amidst changes so as to honor the fundamental mission of translation—exchanges between cultures. So “faithfulness” means to translate the unchangeable, especially the great truth through concise language. To leave the meaning of the original text unchanged after translation; something a lot of people cannot do. According to Yan Fu, there are three reasons: lack of effort, deviation, and lack of critical thinking. “Expressiveness,” on top of “faithfulness,” refers to the accessibility of language. “Elegance” is the artistic creation on the basis of “faithfulness and expressiveness.”

#### 1) Faithfulness

“Faithfulness” ranks at the top of the three standards. It means to remain true to the original text. If a translator adds something or spices up the content at will, it is a rewriting rather than translation. Translation makes sense because

there are two texts of the same meaning in two languages. Faithfulness is the foundation of translation. Faithful rendering of the content and ideas in the original text is the foremost principle that translators should follow, according to Yan Fu. Yang Xianyi [楊憲益], who translated *A Dream of Red Chamber* [紅樓夢] from Chinese into English, said that translation should be faithful, expressive, and elegant; by faithful, it means translation should not deviate too far from the original text; it is similar to how the rose is the favorite flower of the English, but the peony is that of the Chinese, and if you translate rose into peony, it is expressive but not faithful (Zheng 1).

When Yan Fu was translating *Evolution and Ethics*, he was extremely careful in weighing each word and felt that being careful was so difficult that he ranked “faithfulness” as the first. So some scholars believe that “faithfulness” is the gist of Yan Fu’s translation theory. Some say that they believe in “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance,” yet only “faithfulness” is useful; if the text is not expressive or elegant, then translation does not have to or does not have the mandate to be expressive or elegant (Zheng 212).

He translated *Evolution and Ethics* to express his ideas of national survival through “natural selection” and “survival of the fittest.” He is celebrated for his other translations, including Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, Herbert Spencer’s *Study of Sociology*, and Charles-Louis de Secondat Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws*. As the first person who systematically introduced classic economics, political theories, natural science, and philosophy into China, he educated a generation of people.

## 2) Expressiveness

In the second paragraph of Yan Fu’s preface to *Evolution and Ethics*, he elaborated on “expressiveness”:

In English syntax, nouns are often explained where they come up, like a branch in Chinese, the end echoing the beginning. Therefore, English sentences range from dozens of words to hundreds of words. I do not think this sentence pattern will work in Chinese translation. However, if I extract information, I am afraid there will be something missing. So translators must understand the meaning of the whole text, so that they can convey the whole meaning when they put pen to paper. If the original text is too profound, translators should expound the meaning. All these efforts are required for the

translation to be expressive, so as to be faithful. (13, translated by the author)

To ensure the coherence and completeness of the translation, translators must understand the meaning of the whole text, before conveying the whole meaning when they put pen to paper. Being expressive is to naturally convey the meaning of the original text in full. Yan Fu gave more attention to the correct and natural rendering of the meaning rather than strictly following the syntax of the source language. “Faithfulness” and “expressiveness” are equally important and mutually supportive. If only one is realized, translation is not worth the effort, so both are necessary. Instead of blindly imitating the source text, translation is a faithful rendering of the content and meaning. Therefore, translators should not translate word by word. They should ensure the coherence of the translation through reversal, combination, decomposition, and other techniques. “Faithfulness” and “expressiveness” are on a par, while “elegance” is a standard of a higher order. Yan Fu said that faithfulness without expressiveness is as good as no translation. Hence, a piece of translation must be faithful as well as expressive.

Yan Fu divided *Evolution and Ethics* into 18 pieces of prose in the introduction and 17 pieces of prose in the main body. He gave a title to all of them, and wrote commentaries on 28 of them. In his translation, he elaborated on the evolution theory and issued warnings to his contemporaries that China would perish if they did not pull together. He pointed out in one commentary that there is competition for survival among plants and animals; that only the fittest can survive; and that the same applies to human. He called on the Chinese to refrain from being conceited while facing a national crisis.

### 3) Elegance

The translation of *Evolution and Ethics* started in 1895. From that year to 1989 when it was published were the most unusual years in China’s modern history. As China was facing an unprecedented national crisis after the defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, there was an upsurge in the reformation movement. The Chinese version of *Evolution and Ethics* delivered a huge shockwave through China’s intelligentsia. Wu Rulun [鳴汝綸], a well-known writer and educator, thought so highly of the book that he copied it by hand, put it by his pillow and wrote a preface for it. In the preface, Wu Rulun wrote:

The best of the sages' work are both incisive and elegant; the second best is not so insightful, and the writing is fairly good; good thinking cannot exist without good writing.

(Yan 9, translated by the author)

It is a tradition in China to value good poetry and prose. The Chinese adore concise words. Philosophies have been passed down, thanks to writing. Classical literary style was still in use in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is why Yan Fu gave so much importance to elegance. He said that is why I added “elegance” to “faithfulness” and “expressiveness.” By “elegance,” Yan was talking about using ancient words and sentence styles and refraining from modern words, which are not so graceful. He believed that only classical styles were up to the task of demonstrating philosophy and were the correct pattern to follow. Yan Fu said thus:

The six classical works are invariables for China. Confucius thought that of those six works, “I Ching” and “Spring and Autumn” were the most rigorous and refined. Sima Qian said “I Ching” and “Spring and Autumn” were the most profound. Indeed that's the finest truth. (10, translated by the author)

In addition to putting forward a sublime standard for following the classical style for translation, Yan Fu followed the standard so meticulously that his translation remains a classic for Chinese readers. In more than a decade after 1898, the Chinese edition of *Evolution and Ethics* was reprinted and republished over 30 times, a number unmatched for the translation of other Western works. Polished style is an important factor for its popularity.

#### IV. The Source

“Faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” can be traced back to the *Preface to Dharma pāda* [法句經序] by Zhi Qian [支謙], a great Buddhist translator in the Three Kingdom period 1700 years ago, according to renowned writer Qian Zhongshu [錢鍾書]: “Generally speaking, the translation of Buddhist scriptures in ancient China went through four periods: budding from the late Eastern Han Dynasty to the Western Jin Dynasty, to development from

the Eastern Jin Dynasty to the Sui Dynasty, then blossoming in the Tang Dynasty, and closing in the Northern Song Dynasty” (qtd. in Ma 98). There were large scale translations of Buddhist scriptures in China by AD 148 (Chen, *History* 5). The Chinese word “翻译,” meaning “translation,” came into use in AD 384 and referred to all kinds of oral and written translation (Cao 365). The first article on translation theory, *Preface to Dharma pāda* by Zhi Qian, presents the following account:

A Buddhist missionary, Weizhinan, arrived in Wuhan from India in the third year of Huangwu. I got 500 scriptures from him and invited Jiangyan to translate them with me. Although Jiangyan is proficient in Sanskrit, he does not know Chinese, so there are a lot of foreign words or transliteration. The translation is very original and faithful. I complained about the unrefined style. Weishinan replied that we should give priority to the meaning in spreading Buddha’s words, translators should ensure that the translation is readily understood by readers. Others said, Lao Tzu said that the beautiful language is not faithful while the faithful language is not beautiful; Confucius also said books do not exhaust all the words and do not tell it all. Sages’ words are so profound, and we should be the same when translating foreign works. So we took care to maintain the sense of the original and, to a great extent, let the style of the translation take care of itself. In other words, although the wordings are simple and concise, the ideas are profound. (qtd. in Chen, *A Historical* 14, translated by the author)

Although Zhi Qian alluded to “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” here, it refers to different things than Yan Fu’s standard, yet it is only a coincidence.

Zhi Qian, a great Buddhist translator of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, whose original name was Yue and courtesy name Gongming, was an immigrant from the country of the Great Yuezhi. According to the Chinese custom of the time, he used the ethnicon “Zhi” as his surname, to indicate his foreign ancestry. Zhi Qian learned from Zhi Liang, who learned from Zhi Chen. There is a saying: “the best scholars are the three Zhis.” Zhi Qian was very learned and could speak six languages. In the late Eastern Han when mutiny broke out in Luoyang, Zhiqian fled to the Wu Kingdom in Southern China with his

countrymen. The Wu ruler, Sun Quan was so impressed with Zhi Qian's abilities that he appointed him tutor to the crown prince. Since Cao, the ruler of the North, was not a Buddhist, the capital of Wu became the centre of scripture translation.

Weizhinan and Jiangyan were both monks and translators from India, where *Dharma pāda* [曇鉢偈经] was a basic reading for Buddhists. Zhi Qian thought that although the two of them were proficient in Sanskrit, they were not fluent in Chinese, so the direct translation was rough. Since earlier translators of Buddhist scriptures were mostly foreigners whose command of Chinese and experience was limited, their work was not refined. However, later on more Chinese monks joined their ranks and some of them were very learned, like Zhi Qian. A debate on style subsequently emerged. Those who believed in direct translation and raw style quoted Lao Tzu and Confucius to support themselves. And they won the debate. However, Zhi Qian later edited Jiang Yan's translation of *Dharma pāda*. Ren Jiyu [任繼愈] remarked that although those who believed in raw style won the debate, it was those who believed in a polished style whose works were passed down (174). It indicated there is always a discrepancy between theory and practice. The ebb and flow of translation theories hinges on the prevailing ideology.

The translation of Buddhist scripture, an important channel of cultural exchange between China and India, peaked in the Tang Dynasty. After official translation houses were abolished in the Song Dynasty, translation was on the decline, until the introduction of Catholicism into China in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when cultural clashes between the East and the West began. When capitalist trade reached a global scale by the late Qing Dynasty, the introduction of Western thinking and technologies into China to reform the feudal society became an overriding trend in China. Hence, the second high tide of translation began. Yan Fu introduced the three standards of translation "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance" after his translation of *Evolution and Ethics* in 1896, which was not only a crystallization of his own experience, but also an upgrade of ancient translation theories. Yan Fu and Zhi Qian shared a similar understanding on "elegance," but differed on "faithfulness and expressiveness."

## V. Evolution

There are different views on “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance.” The big debates in China’s translation community in the past century revolved around faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance. It is fair to say that Yan Fu’s standard shaped the development of modern Chinese translation theories. It is the most influential and controversial translation theory in modern China (Zhu 19). Yan Fu’s theory started China’s modern translation theory and is a milestone in China’s history of translation. In summary, China’s translation theory went through the stages of originals, faithfulness, elegance, likeness in spirit, and transmutation.

Firstly, originals: Dao An, also named Shi Daoan, a Buddhist monk of the North and South Period, was an important figure of the second wave of the translation of Buddhist scriptures. He put forward the theories of Five Forms of Loss and Three Difficulties in AD 382, which were hailed as the “beginning of Chinese translation theory” by Qian Zhongshu. He also critiqued the *Preface to Dharma pāda* by Zhi Qian as “the tip of the iceberg.” According to Dao An, translations of Buddhist scriptures must follow a rigid pattern. He believed that translators were necessary because people could not understand foreign languages. Formalism stresses the conveyance of the general meaning. Five Forms of Loss are changes in the form, style, and content of the original. Dao An considered all of them components of meaning. By formalism, translators aim to balance style, form, content, and meaning. Dao An was among those who placed more emphasis on the direct translation and original meaning. To propagate ideas of the saint, most translators believed in faithfulness as the yardstick. However, most of them failed to strike a balance between the content and the form or to have a clear grasp on the relationship between two languages. They believed the essence of Buddhist scripture is the meaning, so the mission of translation is to convey the meaning correctly. In addition, most translators then were Buddhist followers who were devout in their belief. Their belief also influenced their approach toward translation: That is why those who believed in direct translation won the debate. On the other hand, those who stressed style played an important part in translation practice. Kumarajiva [鳩摩羅什], a master of translation as famous as Zhen Di and Xuan Zang, opposed direct translation by saying that in the original there is attention to aesthetics, but the sense of beauty and the literary form (dependent on the particularities of Sanskrit) are lost in translation; it is like

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chewing up rice and feeding it to people. His translation kept the original beauty of Sanskrit and was called a new style. Xuan Zang, an eminent monk in the early Tang Dynasty, advocated equal attention to meaning and style. Xuan Zang combined direct translation with free translation, and that is an excellent path.

Liang Qichao [梁啟超] (1873–1929), a famous political thinker and historian, once summarized the pattern of the translation of Buddhist scriptures as follows:

At the very beginning, when people did not have a full grasp of foreign language, what they did was transliteration, which I call immature literal translation. Later, when the command of foreign languages was enhanced, emphasis was on the readability rather than the consistency of the original text. I call this stage immature free translation. At that time, translated works were so scarce that, whenever there was one, it was immensely popular, so quality was not a concern. However, when the business of translation flourished and new versions were available every day, more attention was given to the true meaning, hence the emphasis on literal translation. When these developments and changes went too far, in reaction to this, free translation got the upper hand. Finally the two blended and a new style took shape. These are the developmental stages of translation, and the translation of Buddhist scriptures is only an example. (15, translated by the author)

Buddhist scriptures translated into Chinese were in origin written in Sanskrit or other foreign languages. Other languages and Chinese are different in terms of pronunciation, form, and meaning which are organically interconnected. Early translators of the Han Dynasty did not get the inter-connections, so they approached the differences in an isolated way. Therefore, they suggested the theory of literal translation, or even word-for-word translation. However, literal translation could not convey the true meaning of the sutras. Hence, free translation and an emphasis on aesthetics and readability emerged.

After the Song Dynasty, the translation of Buddhist scriptures was on the decline. At the end of the Qing Dynasty, there were once again exchanges between Oriental and Western cultures. A lot of Western academic, literary, and scientific books were translated into Chinese, so the third high tide of

translation arrived. By introducing the translation standard of “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” in his Chinese version of *Evolution and Ethics*, Yan Fu advocated for the style of classical Chinese. However later, thanks to language reform, Chinese was simplified and written vernacular Chinese became the standard style of writing. In other words, translation must keep up with changes. Except for “elegance,” there was little disagreement over “faithfulness and expressiveness” as important translation standards in later generations. What is ‘being faithful’? What is ‘being elegant’? My view is that translation must correspond with the style of the original text. If the source is elegant, then translation should be elegant. If the source is vulgar or wild, then translation should also be vulgar or wild (Zheng 213). The disagreement over “elegance” is that when the source is not so elegant, a translation with a refined style is not faithful to the original.

I believe in “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” and only “faithfulness” is useful; if the text is not expressive or elegant, then translation does not have to be expressive or elegant. However, the key is that it is impossible to have a fully faithful translation, hence similarity. It is very difficult to be similar in form, meaning, and spirit all at the same time (Zheng 107). Some later scholars either reinterpreted “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance,” or aired some new opinions. Luo Xinzhang, a scholar on translation theory, summarized the development of China’s translation theory into stages of originals, faithfulness, likeness, and transmutation. Some other scholars, taking a historical approach, introduced the theory of three resemblances, namely in form, meaning, and spirit (Ibid. 213).

In the 1960s, Fu Lei [傅雷] (1908–66), put forward the theory of “likeness in form, meaning, and spirit” in the preface of his retranslation of *Father Goriot*. He held that translation is like painting: what is essential is not formal resemblance but rather spiritual resemblance (27). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Luo Xinzhang summarized the development of China’s translation theory into stages of originals, faithfulness, likeness, and transmutation in his book *China’s Unique Translation Theory* (Mu and Xu 295). Qian Zhongshu wrote that the highest standard of translation is transmutation: bodies are sloughed off, but the spirit, appearance, and manner are the same as before (Chen, *Translation* 418). This high level of translation is based on faithfulness to the original. The quality of translation depends on how much the translation fits with the original.

Professor Xu Yuancong [許淵冲] of Peking University, a great translator,

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made great contributions to the transmission of Chinese culture by translating a large number of ancient poems. In the preface of his English translation of *24 Poems* by Chairman Mao Zedong, he introduced the theory of three beauties, that a translation should be as beautiful as the original in three ways: semantically, phonologically and logically. He also prioritized them in the order of semantic, phonological and logical beauty. He said that translators should work for phonological beauty on the basis of semantic beauty, for logical beauty on the basis of phonological beauty and strive to realize all three (Mu and Xu 298).

There have been different opinions on Yan Fu's theory. Despite that, it joins the theories of originals, faithfulness, likeness in spirit, and transmutation as important milestones of China's translation theory. The theories of "three resemblances" and "three beauties" are viewed as developments of "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance."

## VI. Conclusion

The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were important periods of China's modernization, when an important feature was the contact and clash between Chinese and Western cultures through translation. A large number of excellent translators such as Yan Fu, Lu Xun [鲁迅], and Qu Qiubai [瞿秋白] came to the fore. Furthermore, after the translation of sutras, another boom in the translation of foreign ideas began; a boom which promoted reform, political change, and social development. Yan Fu was commended by Hu Shi [胡適] as the first person to introduce modern ideas into China by translating *Evolution and Ethics*. Through translation, he spread the idea of a strong nation and a strong military, as part of the survival of the fittest and independence. The impact of his translation of *Evolution and Ethics* was not only felt among his contemporaries, but by several succeeding generations. His translation and his translation theory determined that he was the initiator of China's modern translation theory.

Yan Fu holds that translation is to convey the profound meaning of the original author's lifework in another language and its mission is cultural exchange and the preservation of ideas. It is through conveying true meaning despite the process of transformation that translation can honor its mission. So "faithfulness" means remaining faithful to the original text. "Expressiveness"

means translation, after meeting the standard of “faithfulness,” and it should be expressed with clarity and readability. Then, what does “elegance” entail? “Faithfulness and expressiveness” are compulsory and clear-cut requirements, while “elegance” is non-compulsory since it is about artistic feeling. “Faithfulness and expressiveness” are mutually supportive, while “elegance” is artistic creation on the basis of the former. “Faithfulness” and “elegance” can also be compared to two floors, one is scientific and the other is aesthetic. “Expressiveness” is the staircase that connects them. Yan Fu stringently followed the guideline of “sincere writing” from *I Ching* [周易] and “clear writing” by Confucius. He quoted Confucius to lend weight to “elegance” that “messages conveyed in plain and unadorned language have no lasting value.” That’s why he took care to ensure his translations possess high literary merits so that they have a strong lasting value (Yan 9). So we can tell that “faithfulness” comes from “sincere writing,” that “expressiveness” comes from “clear writing,” and “elegance” refers to the style of the classic writings. They are interdependent and independent.

Yan Fu stressed “elegance” because writings are for conveying truth. He believed in the similarity between Western academic thinking and ancient Chinese philosophy. Translations of Western thinking should follow the style of *I Ching* and *Spring and Autumn* [春秋], where a central idea was stated at the beginning and was expounded on later. Yan Fu’s translation of *Evolution and Ethics* is a perfect example of this style. Lu Xun remarked in 1930 that *Evolution and Ethics* is old-school and so phonologically beautiful that it is dizzying to read out loud. Wu Rulun, an old-school scholar, puts *Evolution and Ethics* on par with the writings of pre-Qin philosophers (Wang 107). Yan Fu said, “I believe men of letters are the voice of ideals and feelings, so the style must be refined” (15). Classical Chinese writers adored excellent writing as a tool to carry philosophies forward. Yan Fu’s translation work honored his theory, and he was hailed as a paragon for both his work and his theory.

Through the stages of originals, faithfulness, elegance, likeness in spirit, and transmutation, Yan Fu’s theory of “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” was a crucial link. It did not come directly from the translation of Buddhist sutras, when literal translation was the prevailing theory. But Yan’s “elegance” lent support to free translation, so that it further evolved into China’s modern translation theory. Later China’s translation theory developed amidst the tension of modernity and tradition, and new theories such as three points, three resemblances, three beauties, and transmutation emerged and

blossomed.

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## Abstract

The translation theory of “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” put forward by master translator Yan Fu played an important role in linking the past with the future. The theory did not come directly from sutra translation theories. However, the “elegance” element of Yan Fu’s theory expanded the theoretical meaning of the style-emphasizing school of sutra translators. Yan Fu holds that translation is to convey the profound meaning of the original author’s lifework in another language, and its mission is cultural exchanges and the preservation of ideas. It is through conveying true meanings despite the process of transformation that translation can honor its mission. He quoted Confucius to lend weight to “elegance” that “messages conveyed in plain and unadorned language have no lasting value.” “Faithfulness” and “expressiveness” together with “elegance” are interdependent and independent. They became the three gold words in translation theories, which increased the value of translation theories and shaped the basic structure of the modern translation system. Yan Fu’s translation of *Evolution and Ethics* is a perfect example of this style by which he is regarded as the first person to introduce modern ideas into China, to spread the idea of strengthening the nation and the military, and to write about the survival of the fittest and independence. Since then, translation theories in China have evolved in the constant dialectical relations between tradition and modernity. Theories such as “three lines,” “three resemblances,” “three beauties,” and “transmutation” have blossomed. Yan Fu struck a perfect balance between translation theory and practice. With his exemplary translated works of 1.7 million characters, he is held as a paragon for all times.

**Keywords:** three-word translation theory, *Evolution and Ethics*, school of style, school of literal translation, right track of article

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