

A Comparative Study of Eugene Nida's and Lin Yutang's Translation Theories with an Examination of Lin's *Six Records of a Floating Life*

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Abstract: Eugene Albert Nida proposed “Functional Equivalence” as a translation principle, emphasizing that the version’s reception by readers should closely align with the source text’s effect on its readers. Lin Yutang introduced the triple translation principle of “Faithfulness, Smoothness, and Beauty,” advocating for translation as an art. Both Nida and Lin have significantly influenced Chinese translators. However, their distinct eras, cultural contexts, and life experiences have led to evident differences in their translation theories. This study, intended to facilitate a deeper understanding and practical application of their ideas, holds both theoretical and practical significance.

Keywords: Eugene Albert Nida; Lin Yutang; Translation principles; Comparative study

Online publication: March 26, 2025

1. A comparative study of Lin Yutang's and Nida's translation theories

1.1. Similarities in Lin Yutang's and Nida's theories

1.1.1. Consistency of “fidelity, smoothness” and “functional equivalence”

Translation involves transmitting information from one language to another, making the extent to which information is conveyed a central concern in translation research. Both Eugene Albert Nida's “functional equivalence” and Lin Yutang's “faithfulness and fluency” prioritize the effective transmission of the source text's original meaning into the target language ^[1].

Nida's definition of “dynamic reciprocity” emphasizes that “translating means translating meaning.” His concept of “dynamic equivalence” focuses on ensuring that the translated meaning corresponds to the original, aiming for equivalent reception of information between source and target texts. Similarly, Lin's notion of “feeling-tone” aligns with Nida's “expressive factor.” Both scholars stress that translation not only conveys meaning

but also ensures that the target text reproduces the effect of the source text. Only by achieving this can a translation meet the standards of “fidelity, smoothness, and beauty” while fulfilling the goal of “closest natural equivalence.”

1.1.2. Consistency in their understanding of form

Nida argued that the best translations should not read like translations and that a rigorous translator must seek the closest natural equivalence. He emphasized that because languages differ in form, adaptations in form are necessary to preserve content. The extent of these adaptations depends on the linguistic and cultural gaps between the source and target languages ^[2]. Here, “form” refers to the formal features of the language, which are typically arbitrary and conventional.

In his essay *On Translation*, Lin distinguished between two types of literary works: those rooted in the author’s experience and thought, and those grounded in language itself. Both Nida and Lin recognized the importance of form in translation. Nida contended that translation is always possible unless the form is essential for conveying the message. Lin similarly acknowledged that some literary works are intrinsically tied to the language in which they are written.

1.2. Differences between Lin Yutang’s and Eugene Nida’s theories

1.2.1. Literary-oriented vs. linguistic-oriented

The formation of any translation theory is shaped by its historical and cultural context. Nida’s translation theory is rooted in linguistic research and emphasizes the communicative function of the translated language. He argued that preserving the content of the message often necessitates changes to its form. This focus on linguistic factors reflects Nida’s belief that “any message that can be conveyed in one language must also be conveyed in another,” a perspective likely influenced by his work in Bible translation, where he aimed to make God’s message accessible in all languages ^[3].

In contrast, Lin, as a writer and translator, prioritized the communication of aesthetic concepts in literary translation. His principle of “faithfulness, fluency, and beauty” places significant emphasis on the aesthetic value of a text. Lin believed that translation should be regarded as an art form, with the conveyance of aesthetic qualities as a critical task for translators ^[4]. Consequently, the divergent focuses of their translation theories—linguistic versus literary—stem from their respective backgrounds and areas of expertise.

1.2.2. Traditional study approach vs. scientific study approach

Nida introduced scientific methods into translation studies, grounding his theories in contemporary developments in linguistics, communication theory, information theory, semiotics, and anthropology. He argued that the translation process could be described scientifically, much like linguistics is classified as a descriptive science. According to Nida, transferring information between languages can be systematically analyzed and understood ^[3].

Both Nida and Lin sought to address the longstanding debate between “direct translation” and “literal translation.” Nida resolved this debate by proposing “dynamic equivalence,” shifting the focus from a strict comparison of source and target texts to the reader’s reaction. This provided a practical standard for evaluating translations.

Lin, on the other hand, rejected both “direct translation” and “literal translation” as traditional methods, advocating for a single, appropriate approach to guide translation activities. However, his perspective lacked a specific methodology, resulting in a more subjective and less standardized view of translation. This subjectivity makes it challenging to use his approach as an objective guide for translation practices [5].

2. Appreciation of Six Records of a Floating Life

2.1. Lin Yutang’s view of literature and translation

Lin believed that the ideal prose is one that embodies “the natural rhythm of language.” He creatively translated the Western concept of humor into the Chinese term “幽默” (humor) and, throughout his life, maintained an artistic paradigm characterized by a conversational style, leisurely humor, and a Taoist spirit. This approach reflected his view of literature as a medium for expressing spirituality and light-heartedness. As Lin stated, “A faithful version will not only convey the meaning of the source text, but also its spirit. The version should be faithful to the spirit of the words and their implications. It’s not possible to achieve absolute faithfulness” (On Translation, 1933:14).

Lin’s writing transcends reality, embodying a liberal spirit and the wisdom of “seeing the world with a warm heart and cold eyes.” While he explores themes of confronting life, his work avoids bleakness. Similarly, his discussion of transforming cultural identity refrains from criticism or attacks. Viewing the world’s troubles from a detached perspective, Lin captures their comical and absurd aspects, ultimately pursuing spiritual enlightenment to achieve an ideal state of mind [6].

Lin’s translations are characterized by accessibility, avoiding excessive jargon to ensure comprehensibility for readers with moderate cultural backgrounds. He employed poetic and evocative language, describing nature with phrases such as “chanting with the wind,” “seeing the clouds,” “hearing the rain,” “enjoying the snow,” “gathering the moon,” “admiring the mountains,” and “playing with the water.” This approach infused delicate and moving Oriental moods into his writing, contrasting the fast-paced and competitive modern Western lifestyle.

Rejecting philosophical abstractions and political slogans, Lin’s writing style achieved a harmonious blend of the elegant and the vulgar, free from pedantry. He sought to attract the ordinary toward refinement and elevate refinement to meet the ordinary, thus unifying both elements. His principles of “Lightness,” “Timelessness,” “Sweetness,” “Spirituality,” and “Leisure” collectively defined his notion of “Beauty.”

2.2. The selective adaptation of the original text

Six Records of a Floating Life is an autobiographical essay written by Shen Fu during the Qing Dynasty, consisting of four surviving volumes: *Boudoir Records of Happiness*, *Leisure Records of Interest*, *Troubled Records of Sorrow*, and *Quick Records of Wanderings*. The book chronicles the author’s marital life, family changes, leisure activities, and his observations and experiences during travels. It is interspersed with vivid depictions of mundane yet fascinating details of home life and travel anecdotes. However, capturing the unique charm and unconventional nature of this work in English is a challenging task that not all translators can accomplish [7].

Lin began his translation of *Six Records of a Floating Life* in 1935. The protagonists, Mr. and Mrs. Shen Fu, were ordinary yet refined individuals who did not achieve significant acclaim. Nevertheless, they cherished life, found joy in nature’s beauty—mountains, forests, springs, and rocks—and explored picturesque destinations despite their modest means. Their life, described by the hostess Yun as one of “rice and cloth, and a lifetime of happiness,”

was regarded by Lin as a rare treasure. Lin himself outlined his vision of an ideal life: a study for uninterrupted work, a family providing freedom and comfort, the liberty of a casual home, a circle of close friends, a skilled cook specializing in vegetable dishes, a valuable collection of books, some Ming Dynasty novels, and a garden adorned with bamboo trees and plum blossoms [8]. His ideals closely mirrored the free, leisurely, and unrestrained lifestyle portrayed in Shen Fu's writing.

Lin's philosophy of life is most notably reflected in his literary creation, particularly through his "spirituality theory." He asserted:

"Each person has his own individuality, and the literature in which this individuality is freely expressed without restriction is called spirituality."

Elaborating on the characteristics of "spirituality," Lin added:

"The essential word in spiritual literature is 'truth.' Expressing one's individual spirit leads to truth; achieving truth resembles a ceaseless source of flowing water—unstoppable, day and night. Matters of great importance or minor joys and sorrows can all be articulated with pen and ink. Every sentence must be true, and every sentence should be recitable. The language should not strive for eccentricity but must retain natural elegance, aiming not merely for clarity but achieving it effortlessly." [2]

It is evident that Lin's concept of "spirituality" aligns with the philosophy of open-mindedness, detachment from fame and fortune, optimism, and contentment embodied in *Six Records of a Floating Life*.

2.3. The adaptive selection of the translators to the translated text

2.3.1. Dimension of the language

The adaptive choice of language dimension refers to the translator's "adaptive choice of language form transformation" in various aspects and levels of translation. When Lin discussed the principle of translation, he emphasized that translation should be based on the sentence, rather than the word. According to Lin, the sentence is a structured and organized unit, with the words within it coherently integrated [9].

For example:

"... then put away the little stone incense tripod and tried to crawl in. The shrine was, however, too small for my body by half and managed to sit on the ground, leaving my legs outside. I turned my traveling cap round, using the back to cover my face, and thus sat there listening with my eyes closed, but all I could hear was the whistling of winds blowing by." [5]

This passage describes the scene in which Shen Fu gets lost while searching for his relatives and spends the night in a shrine. The original text primarily consists of short sentences with few connecting words, arranged in a logical sequence of actions and events. By contrast, English is an analytical language that often reflects tense and clarifies logic through grammatical structures such as morphology, word order, and related words. Therefore, applying the structure of Chinese run-on sentences directly to English would create reading difficulties.

As a translator proficient in English grammar, Lin skillfully adds conjunctions such as "and," "however," "thus," and "but," as well as participial phrases like "leaving my legs outside," "using the back," "listening with my eyes closed," and prepositions such as "away," "in," "for," "on," and "with." These additions make the discourse more natural, logical, and coherent [10]. Although the word "shrine" does not appear directly in the original text, Lin

adds it to clarify the location, using “however” afterward to convey the transitive relationship, emphasizing the limited space and the resulting discomfort.

In the original, Shen Fu describes his posture by stating: “with the wind hat on back to cover his face, sitting halfway in the middle and out on his knees.” Lin cleverly adapts this to “sitting halfway in the middle and out on his knees,” where the former represents the cause and the latter the effect. The phrase “using the back to cover my face” is transformed into “all I could hear was the whistling of winds blowing,” seamlessly integrating the sentence structure to achieve logical clarity and fluent articulation. This makes the translation more fluent and natural.

2.3.2. Dimension of the culture

The adaptive choice of cultural dimension requires translators to focus on conveying and interpreting bilingual cultural connotations during the translation process. *Six Records of a Floating Life* contains numerous culturally specific terms that carry a strong Eastern flavor. In the 1930s, Western countries were undergoing industrialization, and many people’s minds were overwhelmed by material pressures. In his translation, Lin sought to preserve as much of the original’s unique Chinese cultural characteristics as possible, aiming to introduce Western readers to the full depth of Eastern aesthetic heritage ^[12].

For example:

“After the drinking of the customary twin cups between bride and groom, we sat down together at dinner...” ^[5]

The “twin cups” refer to an ancient Han Chinese wedding ceremony in which the bride and groom drink together in the bridal chamber. Lin does not merely gloss over this ritual; instead, he provides a detailed explanation, allowing English-speaking readers to fully experience this unique Eastern wedding custom ^[13].

2.3.3. Dimension of communication

In contrast to linguistic and cultural adaptation, communicative adaptation focuses on whether the communicative intent of the original text is faithfully conveyed in the translation ^[14].

For example:

“While we were thus bandying words about, it was already midnight.” ^[5]

The term “leak” in the original refers to a “funnel,” a timekeeping instrument commonly used in ancient times. In this context, “three leaks” indicates that it was midnight. Lin adapts the term to “midnight” to ensure the communicative intent is preserved while making the translation more accessible to the target audience ^[15].

3. Conclusion

In summary, a comparative study of Eugene Nida’s and Lin Yutang’s views on translation reveals that each perspective has its strengths and weaknesses. Lin, as an outstanding writer and translator, approached translation from a literary standpoint. His view is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese aesthetics and literary criticism, emphasizing the transmission of aesthetic elements in the translation of literary works. These translation ideas have positively impacted the high-quality translation of numerous literary works.

Lin’s decision to translate *Six Records of a Floating Life*, a work that aligns with his cultural values, fully reflects his adaptation to the ecological environment of translation. Furthermore, Lin employs various translation

strategies, such as alienation and naturalization, across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. This approach effectively fulfills the communicative function of translation while also promoting Eastern culture.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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