

“Benign Westernization” vs. “Illegitimate Westernization”: The Linguistic Subjectivity Boundary in Yu Kwang-Chung’s Translation Philosophy

—A Translation Ethics Centered on the Chinese Language Subjectivity

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Abstract

In the current informational era marked by the proliferation of so-called AI-assisted “Democratization of Translation” and the disorderly translation practices prevalent in new media, the field of translation faces new practical challenges. Grounded on the framework of translation ethics, this paper reinterprets the core connotation of Yu Kwang-chung’s concept of “Benign Westernization.” It introduces the notion of a “Linguistic Subjectivity Boundary,” which is delineated by a dual matrix: the bottom line of “readability” and the upper line of “aesthetic elasticity.” The essence of Yu’s translation ethics entails the translators, as agents, anchoring themselves in Chinese subjectivity, seeking a dynamic balance among the three responsibilities of “fidelity to the source text, guardianship of the target language, and accessibility for readers.” This ethical thought provides a pathway of methodology characterized by “pre-translation assessment, intra-translation transformation, and post-translation revision,” which emphasizes that no technology can replace the translator’s native language proficiency and awareness of cultural subjectivity. To Revive “Benign Westernization” is a response to the chaotic phenomenon of malignant westernization, and also a conscious return to reconstructing a healthy Chinese linguistic ecology and safeguarding the consciousness of Chinese cultural subjectivity in the digital age.

Keywords

Yu Kwang-Chung, Benign Westernization, Translation Ethics, Linguistic Subjectivity, Readability, Aesthetic Elasticity

1. Research Background

From the 1960s to 1980s, Yu Kwang-chung, in his translation essays, constantly criticized the chaotic situations of “Malignant Westernization” in Chinese language. He pointed out that the translators’ practice of “Westernization without Assimilation” losing the artistic conception of the original text and the true essence of Chinese. This displayed the author’s profound cultural introspection and scholarly responsibility. To this day, it is necessary to address the debate on domestication and foreignization, the chaotic proliferation of wanton translations in new social media, and the dilemmas of unrefined translation practices. This paper rethinks the definition of the boundary of linguistic subjectivity, and also reflects on the fundamentals of linguistic and cultural exchange through the way of balanced translation methodology.

After forty years of translation practice and theoretical accumulation. Yu Kwang-chung first introduced the types of Westernization in his 1961 essay “The Westernization of Chinese language.” In the 1970s, he clearly stated that superior benign Westernization is legitimate import, whereas covert illegitimate Westernization act as erosion and a quagmire. His core argument anchors itself in Chinese subjectivity, striking a balance between “capturing English with perfectly fluent Chinese” and “not failing the mission of the Chinese language”, thereby achieving both aesthetic elasticity and readability (Yu, 2002). The anchoring of Chinese subjectivity lies in the awakening of translator’s subjectivity: a profound mastery of the mother tongue enables translators to make creative trade-offs and transformations with tension on the linguistic boundary under the guidance of cultural subjectivity. This precisely points to the core question of translation ethics: how to find a dynamic balance between “fidelity to the source text” and “safeguarding the subjectivity of the target language”?

Domestic academic research on his translation thoughts has achieved fruitful results, but most perspectives are limited to linguistic skills, stylistic choices and poetry translation craftsmanship, while discussions of his translation ethics remain superficial and rarely take linguistic subjectivity as the core logical clue. Yu’s ultimate pursuit lies in evaluating translation quality through the ethical framework of triple responsibilities: “fidelity to the source text, guardianship of the target language, and service to the reader.” And few studies integrate his triple responsibilities of translation into a systematic ethical framework or apply his philosophical ideas to reflect on contemporary dilemmas such as AI-assisted translation and new media translational disorder. Against such research backdrop, this paper mixes the notion of benign Westernization into translation ethics, constructs the dual-matric framework of linguistic subjectivity boundary, and further extends Yu’s ethical thoughts to interpret and rectify the chaotic translation phenomena in today’s digital era, thereby complementing and deepening the existing research on Yu Kwang-chung’s translation philosophy.

2. Ethical Interpretation of the Linguistic Subjectivity Boundary

2.1. Ethical Origins and Definition of “Linguistic Subjectivity Boundary”

There are various translation schools, but the fundamental dilemma remains the same: the differences between the source language and the target language are irreducible. Translation demands fidelity-to the work, to the author, and to the reader. But a more foundational question arises: should translation also bear responsibility for the target language itself? The natural ecology of the target language is a fundamental issue concerning the survival of national linguistic subjectivity. Yu Kwang-chung’s discourse on “Benign Westernization” stems from a deep reflection on this long-overlooked ethical dimension. Hence, the author proposes the new translation ethics concept: “The Linguistic Subjectivity Boundary (LBS).” It refers to the extent to which a translated text can absorb Western grammar and expressions without impairing the subject status of Chinese as an independent language and maintaining its ecological integrity. Defining this boundary of subjectivity requires establishing a dual-matrix of “mutual compromise”: first, the bottom line of “readability” at the syntactic level (translating the source text), meaning whether the translation conforms to Chinese conventions and whether readers can understand it smoothly without awkwardness; second, the upper line of “aesthetic elasticity” at the cultural-stylistic level (translating the original meaning), that is, whether the translation can retain the original flavor while skillfully integrating the unique spirit, rhythm and charm of Chinese (Yu, 2014).

2.2. Readability: The Bottom Line Criterion at the Syntactic Level

“Readability” means “expressing all meanings without twists” is the primary metric of the LBS. A translation must be fluent, natural, and not jarring, conforming to the paratactic norm of Chinese; readers can understand without pause in the mother tongue environment, without switching between Chinese and English syntax, and achieve barrier-free comprehension. Readability is not merely about simplifying the narrative; it demands that the translator, grounded in the intuition of a native Chinese speaker, render texts using natural Chinese word order, reject the mechanical copying of English hypotactic structures, and uphold the basic readable line of the Chinese syntactic ecosystem. This requirement seems basic, but it is frequently violated in practice. Yu Kwang-chung once listed three typical examples of “Westernization without assimilation”: the overuse of conjunctions, bloated attributives, and the abuse of passive voice. The English connective “and” is representative. Translating it does not mean indiscriminately rendering “and” as “和”. Chinese emphasizes “broken sentences but connected meanings” and prioritizes parataxis. Yu criticized: “In current Chinese, the relationships of coordination and opposition are increasingly monopolized by the word ‘和’.” (Yu, 1987)” Consider the following sentence: “But when you add to that damage and today’s dollars for buying replacements”. A simplistic translation using “和” would fail to

convey the progressive tone and the intensified criticism, thereby distorting the interrogator's original intent. Considering attributives: English allows long post-nominal modifiers, while Chinese preposes them and prefers brevity. A translation like “那本汤姆前天从新华图书馆借来的杂志” in Chinese reads clumsily (illustrative constructed example); it should be restructured as “前天汤姆从新华图书馆借来的那本杂志”. Uniformly replacing diverse native passive expressions like “遭,” “受,” or “为……所……” with “被” strips Chinese of its precise referential qualities. Essentially, this is Westernization transgressing the readability bottom line of linguistic subjectivity. Thereupon, we can distill the criterion for the “readability” bottom line: if a translation can present itself naturally in Chinese word order, and native speakers can grasp the source meaning without consciously reconstructing the word order or structure, it meets the bottom line requirement of “readability.”

2.3. Dynamic Balance of Triple Responsibilities and Aesthetic Elasticity in Stylistic Transformation

Chinese and Western literary concepts differ due to distinct thinking paradigms. The art of translation balance lies in absorbing the advantages of Western logical precision and completing transformation with the aesthetic rhythm of Chinese, learning from each other to “draw on strengths to make up for weaknesses and resolve stagnation”. “Aesthetic elasticity” is precisely the mutual respect at the ethical level. Specifically, the translator's triple responsibilities require a dynamic balance, unified by the anchor of Chinese subjectivity. First, the responsibility of “living fidelity” to the source text: not mechanical word-for-word faithfulness. Grounded in an active stance of “mastering and capturing English,” the translator must discern the core intent and aesthetic qualities of the original, preserve its spiritual essence, and then creatively reconstruct it within the syntactic conventions of Chinese, instead of word-for-word copying replica (Lin & Yang, 2025). Second, towards the target language, the responsibility of “devoted guardianship,” rejecting the covert encroachment of Westernization and preventing the erosion of the Chinese linguistic ecology. This is the core of Yu's principle of “not fail the mission of the Chinese language” (Jiang, 2008). “Devotion” is not blind loyalty; it involves assimilating foreign linguistic nutrients while ensuring the indigenous core of Chinese remains intact. This balance adjusts dynamically with genre: poetry translation may moderately retain certain Westernized structures like enjambment or inversion to expand Chinese aesthetic elasticity, while official documents and everyday texts must strictly adhere to syntactic norms. The translator must thus locate a context-specific dynamic balance between “fidelity to the source” and “guardianship of the native tongue”. Third, the responsibility of “accessibility” towards the reader. Translations by professional translators ultimately serve a broad readership. Acting as a deep researcher of Chinese culture, the translator upholds “unobstructed comprehensibility” as the standard for readability and actively fulfills the responsibility of accessibility for readers through profound liter-

ary cultivation. This is not only a requirement for Chinese but also a commitment to the reader's experiential engagement. The truth, goodness, and beauty within the translation should be felt, experienced, and comprehended by the reader. These triple responsibilities-fidelity, guardianship, accessibility-are unified in the core anchor of "Chinese subjectivity." They form an elastic and flexible spectrum that adjusts dynamically with genre, context, and era, seeking balance within tension, and guarding the subject at the boundary.

3. Theoretical Deepening and Contemporary Adaptation of the LSB

3.1. The Dynamic Dialectic of the Boundary: A Non-Rigid Elastic Zone

The LSB described in this paper is not a fixed threshold but an elastic discursive field. The translator adjusts dynamically according to textual attributes, contemporary context, cultural needs, and reader expectations. This is both an elaboration of Yu Kwang-chung's core principle of "walking the middle path" and the contemporary relevance of his theory (Huang, 2021). "Readability" anchors the norm of Chinese parataxis and conciseness. Regardless of era, the principle of "non-reducibility"-that readers should comprehend the text without mentally reconstructing English syntax—serves as the rigid criterion for determining whether Westernization has crossed the boundary. The upper line of "aesthetic elasticity," however, allows flexible weighting according to genre-any structure that presents beauty can be actively absorbed or adopted. For instance, preserving good English rhythmic beats directly to convey a poem's rhythm and spirit; here, the "non-reducibility" principle yields somewhat to achieve both information transfer and aesthetic recreation in poetry. The inclusive approach we advocate requires more cautious weighing between "fidelity" and "guardianship." Literary and poetic translation tends to expand "outward," treating moderate boundary-crossing as a proactive strategy to compensate for linguistic limitations. However, in practical genres (news, official documents, scientific texts), translation must contract "inward." Informational accuracy becomes paramount, prioritizing "accessibility," and the boundary should tighten to strictly prevent the erosion of Chinese syntactic ecology by Europeanized structures. Yu's boundary theory is not an absolute rejection of Westernization but sets "serving the development of Chinese" as the fundamental premise, avoiding the binary trap of "total Westernization" or "blind exclusion."

3.2. The Uniqueness of Ethical Positioning: Dialogue with Western Translation Ethics

In terms of theoretical concern, establishing the dual matrices represents genuine equivalence within an English-hegemonic context-resisting subordination without falling into binary opposition. Lawrence Venuti's ethics of foreignization prioritizes source-culture identity, carrying a distinct political agenda of cultural coun-

ter-assault and resistance to translator invisibility, which often sacrifices target-reader accessibility (Venuti, 2019). Eugene Nida's functional equivalence ethics, centered on reader acceptance, risks sliding into excessive domestication, losing the original's spiritual essence (Pym, 2018). Admittedly, Yu and Venuti uphold the necessity of resisting linguistic and cultural homogenization. Likewise, Yu echoes Nida's emphasis on reader comprehensibility and communicative effectiveness. The fact is that Venuti prioritizes foreignization as a political stance while Nida subordinates linguistic form to reader understanding, whereas Yu places Chinese linguistic subjectivity above both ideological resistance and mere reader convenience. His ethics thus follow a middle path that recognize the rationality of Western translational theories yet refuses to subordinate Chinese linguistic norms to either foreign cultural agenda or functionalism. Yu Kwang-chung's path of "strategic mediation" takes Chinese subjectivity as its absolute anchor: "living fidelity" does not mean literal translation but retains the spiritual core; "guardianship" does not reject Westernization but uphold ecological standards; "accessibility" does not pander but only conforms to mother tongue comprehension habits. The essence of Yu's core translation ethics is to make Westernized elements "submit and assimilate" into Chinese, rather than forcing Chinese to submit to Western logic (Guo, 2010). The ethical value of translation far exceeds mere stylistic creation; the paramount consideration for the translator is the survival of the mother tongue's ecology. This positioning of ethical value truly safeguards the distinctiveness of Chinese as an independent linguistic system and offers an irreplaceable reference for constructing contemporary translation ethics.

3.3. Revitalizing the Theory in the Digital Age: Correcting Current Disorder

As technology advances, translators must increasingly return to foundational principles. The issues raised in Chapter 1—the globalization debate over domestication and foreignization, the proliferation of AI translation, and the disorderly practices in new media—precisely validate the contemporary relevance of Yu's theory. AI translation operates purely on algorithms; the near-vanishing threshold of "everyone can translate," coupled with a disregard for the erosion of English cultural hegemony, has led to the implicit loss of cultural subjectivity (Gao & Yu, 2020). New media translation increasingly prioritizes brevity and virality over quality, chasing traffic and audience gratification by deliberately manufacturing "translationese". This results in severe distortion, automatic retreat, and the paradox of works going global while the corresponding Chinese linguistic ecology weakens and Chinese culture becomes alienated (Lin & Zhao, 2025).

Current translational disorder demands critical examination and correction. First, within AI-generated large language model corpora, Europeanization is disproportionately high in scientific, educational, cultural, and medical texts (Li, 2025). Machines lack sensitivity to Chinese parataxis and, more critically, lack the transformative consciousness to "compensate for deficiencies." The absence of

Chinese linguistic subjectivity means AI will always struggle to reach the ethical self-awareness of human translators. Second, the “everyone can translate” paradigm triggers a crisis of quality standards. Digital platforms pursuit of exponential dissemination has spawned a vast quantity of “fast-food” inferior translations and web literature, where the typical “Westernization without assimilation” syntactic pathologies identified by Yu have become ubiquitous. “Malignant Westernization” spreads virally through digital channels, its destructiveness far exceeding Yu’s original concerns. Third, highly compressed communicative demands squeeze translation ethics. Faced with commercial interests, “speed” overrides all else. Whether a translation reaches the maximum number of people at the fastest speed becomes the “gold standard”; “topping the charts” means “monetization.” The sacrifice often occurs at both ends: “guardianship” and “fidelity.” Yet, excellent works still emerge online. Responsible writers, new media creators, and translators actively uphold Yu’s ethical stance. They prove through works that withstand time: regardless of technological iteration, the core of translation is the ethical choice of the “person”-the native language proficiency, cultural subjectivity awareness, and conscious adherence are irreplaceable by any technology.

Facing digital-era disorder, Yu Kwang-chung’s “Benign Westernization” ethics offers three key corrective paths, corresponding precisely to the translator’s triple responsibilities of “fidelity to source text, guardianship of target language, accessibility for readers”:

Pathway one is “Pre-translation Assessment”-the translator uses the LSB as a yardstick, examining translation quality from the height of linguistic subjectivity, safeguarding “readability,” and finding the “most idiomatic” expression. For example, translating the English sentence “He was criticized for his lack of punctuality (illustrative constructed example).” A direct translation would like “他因为缺乏准时而被批评” is clearly malignant Westernization. Translated as “他因不按时而挨了批评”, it returns to the Chinese context, finding the corresponding expression, replacing the passive voice and the abstract noun “lack” with the active voice and verb-driven rhythm of Chinese, thereby fitting our discursive field while ensuring accurate communication. With this in mind, translators must identify the Westernization trap of “passive voice + abstract noun” prior to translation, preserving information while returning to Chinese norms. Another example is the earlier Congressional hearing sentence: “But when you add to that damage and today’s dollars for buying replacements.” A mechanical translation like “但当你把那种损害和如今用于购买替换品的美元加在一起” loses the progressive critical tone and violates the paratactic nature of Chinese “sentence breaks with meaning connection.” Applying the “readability” yardstick, the translator adjusts it to “除却上述损害，还需追加如今采购替换品所要花的美元”，which aligns with authentic Chinese expression.

Pathway two is “Intra-Translation Transformation”-actively applying transformative strategies between “fidelity” and “guardianship.” AI translations that are “unnatural” can be actively elevated by capable translators from “illegitimate”

to “benign” Westernization, achieving a relatively flexible balance between information content and reading experience. Youdao Online Dictionary translates “The reinforcement is not only necessary but also urgently needed” as “这一强化不仅是必要的, 而且是迫切需要的” (illustrative example of mainstream machine dictionary output). While readable, it can be optimized by removing the redundant judgment structure “是……的” and employing a concise Chinese rhythm to elevate aesthetic elasticity. A translator in the transformation phase might render it as “这项政策不仅必要, 而且刻不容缓。” Another example: AI-generated malignant Westernized sentences like “关于这个项目的推进会议将于明天召开(illustrative constructed example)” (The meeting regarding the advancement of this project will be held tomorrow) require the translator to actively transform it into “项目推进会将于明日召开”, fully preserving the original information while conforming to the Chinese norm of predominantly short sentences.

Pathway three is “Post-Translation Revision”-establishing a humanistic review process based on “fidelity, guardianship, accessibility,” embedding it modularly throughout the editing and publishing chain to ensure the consistency of Chinese subjectivity. For instance, when a new media platform translated foreign news: “Dozens of villages were destroyed in the tsunami” (foreign news release, anonymous source). The initial translation was “数十个村庄在海啸中被摧毁”. While understandable, the passive marker “被” is monotonous. Activating the subjectivity check in the review process, it was changed to “数十个村庄毁于海啸”. Using the native passive expression “毁于” (perished in/destroyed by) not only safeguards the readability bottom line but also enriches the diversity of Chinese passive markers.

Under the closed-loop effect of these triple pathways, the consciousness of cultural subjectivity must always reside in the translator’s mind, transforming from concept into an actionable chain: pre-translation assessment using the boundary of subjectivity as the ruler, intra-translation transformation as the method, and post-translation revision as the shield. Solidifying “assessment, transformation, revision” as the core operations of daily translation quality control is essential. Ultimately, “Benign Westernization” ceases to be merely an ideal yardstick for a few translators but becomes a replicable quality standard for the industry.

3.4. Limitations

This study has several inherent limitations. First, the LSB framework proposed here is primarily normative and prescriptive, just offering ethical guidelines rather than rigid quantitative rules. Second, the analysis centers chiefly on Chinese-English translation, and its applicability to other language pairs remains to be further verified. Third, the balance between readability and aesthetic elasticity is discourse-sensitive; the operational standards of benign Westernization may differ substantially across literary genres, text types, and target readership groups.

4. Conclusion

Translation is a cultural choice that bears directly on the sustainability of the native linguistic ecology. Framed within translation ethics, this paper systematically reinterprets the core logic of Yu Kwang-chung's "Benign Westernization" translation philosophy: its essence is the translator anchoring in Chinese subjectivity, seeking a dynamic balance among the triple responsibilities of "fidelity, guardianship, accessibility," using the bottom line of "readability" and the upper line of "aesthetic elasticity" as a dual-matric ethical judgment framework. Westernization is the means; the revitalization of Chinese and the preservation of subjectivity are the ends. Yu Kwang-chung's lifelong adherence to "Benign Westernization" represents a clear recognition of the ethical responsibility towards mother tongue culture. In today's tide of AI and the era of digital humanities, reviving "Benign Westernization" is a conscious return to the awareness of cultural subjectivity.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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