ABSTRACT

Translation is the reproduction of the exact ideas of an original script in another language. To achieve this, two opposing techniques: "literal translation", an emphasis on the equivalence of form, and "free translation", an attempt to preserve the content of message, have evolved in the field of translation. However, inconsistent connotations have perpetuated debates over the two techniques, resulting in misrepresentations of many original works. This academic exercise traces the evolution of the concepts of literal and free translations, documenting changes in their definitions from 1899 to 1949.

An overview of the history of translation from the Han to early Qing dynasty will be presented first. It will be argued that in the early translation works and discussions on the subject, vague notions of both concepts have emerged. Thereafter, a succinct translation principle demanding "fidelity, fluency and elegance", was postulated by Yan Fu (1853-1921). This, together with the translation technique used by Lin Shu (1852-1924) in late Qing, invited further criticisms especially after the revolutionary May Fourth Movement in 1919. The different concepts proposed by discussants will be examined and compared, to provide the background for an analysis of the great debate on the subject in the early thirties, which was an attempt to rectify rampant misconceptions.

Finally, with a more holistic understanding of literal and free translations, it is suggested that a combination of both techniques is not only possible, but also necessary for the ultimate goal of translation.