



## An analysis of the rewriting strategy of the english edition of lectures on China's traditional political thoughts

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### Abstract

This paper explores the rewriting strategies used in the English edition of Xu Datong's Lectures on China's Traditional Political Thoughts. Drawing on Lefevere's theory of rewriting, the study analyzes how translation adapts ideologically dense and culturally specific content for an international audience. Through close comparison of the Chinese and English texts, key strategies such as simplification, omission, cultural substitution, and ideological reframing are identified. The analysis shows that the translator balances fidelity with readability by modifying pronouns, condensing repetitive content, correcting factual errors, and providing explanatory footnotes. These changes improve accessibility while preserving core meanings. The translator acts not only as a linguistic intermediary but also as a cultural mediator, reshaping Chinese political discourse for global understanding. The study highlights how translation is both a linguistic and ideological act, crucial in cross-cultural communication. It offers insights into the role of rewriting in promoting Chinese political thought abroad and underscores the importance of strategic adaptation in translating culturally embedded academic texts.

**Keywords:** Lectures on China's traditional political thoughts, rewriting strategy, english translation

### Introduction

In the context of globalization and the deepening of China's cultural outreach, translation has become a key channel for promoting understanding between civilizations. In particular, the translation of political and philosophical texts has taken on new significance in recent years. These texts serve not only as a window into China's ideological history but also as instruments of national soft power, projecting Chinese discourse to a global audience. Among such works, Lectures on China's Traditional Political Culture by Xu Datong stands out as a paradigmatic example of a politically and culturally embedded academic work translated for an international readership. The English version, Lectures on China's Traditional Political Thoughts, translated by Yang Dan and published by Peter Lang in 2023, presents a valuable case for investigating the role of rewriting in translation, especially in conveying politically nuanced and culturally loaded content.

Rewriting, as first conceptualized by Lefevere (1992) [3], goes beyond the linguistic transformation of texts. It is deeply embedded in ideological, cultural, and institutional constraints that shape the translator's choices. From this perspective, translation is not merely a linguistic act but a form of rewriting under the influence of patronage, poetics, and ideology. This theoretical framework, rooted in the cultural turn of translation studies, provides a lens through which we can examine how translation becomes a means of cultural negotiation and political recontextualization.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to explore the rewriting strategies employed in the English version of Lectures on China's Traditional Political Culture. By comparing selected passages from the original Chinese text with their English counterparts, the study seeks to reveal how rewriting has been used to adapt the text for a Western academic audience. Specifically, it will identify strategies such as simplification, addition, omission, cultural substitution, and ideological reorientation. The analysis is

based on a close reading of key chapters and contextualized within broader theoretical discussions on translation and rewriting.

The significance of this study is threefold. First, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how Chinese political discourse is mediated through translation. As China increasingly seeks to shape global narratives, understanding how political concepts are framed in translation is crucial. Second, it offers empirical evidence for the application of rewriting theory in the translation of academic texts. Unlike literary or commercial texts, academic political writings pose specific challenges due to their ideological density and culturally specific references. Finally, it adds to the limited scholarship on the English translations of contemporary Chinese political works, especially those aimed at popularizing Marxist and traditional Chinese political thought.

To achieve its research goals, the paper is organized into four sections. Following this introduction, the second section provides a brief literature review of rewriting theory and its key theoretical schools, including the cultural school, functionalist approaches, and creative treason perspectives. The third section presents a comparative analysis of the Chinese and English versions of Xu Datong's text, focusing on how rewriting strategies are employed. The final section concludes the paper by summarizing the main findings, discussing their implications for future translation practice, and reflecting on the broader cultural and ideological significance of rewriting in the global transmission of Chinese political thought.

In examining how Xu's ideas have been reshaped through translation, this paper also interrogates the role of the translator as a cultural mediator who not only renders language but also rewrites ideology. It calls attention to the complex interplay between fidelity and creativity, tradition and modernity, East and West, within the act of translation itself.

## Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on translation rewriting strategies have produced a range of theoretical perspectives. These can be broadly categorized into five influential schools, each offering distinct insights into the motivations, forms, and boundaries of rewriting in translation.

The Cultural School views translation as a culturally manipulated and ideologically embedded activity. Rewriting, in this context, is shaped by the dominant poetics, ideological constraints, and patronage systems within the target culture. Lefevere (1992)<sup>[3]</sup> conceptualized translation as a form of “rewriting” driven by cultural and institutional powers. Venuti (1995)<sup>[9]</sup> emphasized the tension between “domestication” and “foreignization” as strategies of cultural resistance or assimilation. Bassnett and Lefevere (2001)<sup>[11]</sup> further elaborated on the cultural turn in translation studies. Chinese scholars such as Zhao Wenjing (2022)<sup>[16]</sup>, Wang Jia (2020)<sup>[11]</sup>, Xu Min (2019)<sup>[14]</sup>, Xu Jun (2020)<sup>[13]</sup>, and Li Zhiqi (2018)<sup>[5]</sup> have applied this theory to case studies, demonstrating how cultural manipulation shapes translated texts.

In contrast, the Functionalist School—particularly Skopos Theory—focuses on the purpose (Skopos) of the translation, arguing that the translator is entitled to rewrite the source text in ways that serve the communicative function of the target text. Vermeer (1984)<sup>[10]</sup> introduced this purpose-driven approach, and Nord (1991)<sup>[6]</sup> expanded on its practical applicability. Domestic scholars such as Yuan Binye (2021)<sup>[15]</sup> and Li Zhiqi (2018)<sup>[5]</sup> have emphasized the functional motivation behind textual modifications and rewriting strategies.

The Formalist School, by contrast, upholds the principle of fidelity to the original form, structure, and style. It rejects excessive rewriting and insists on the translator’s duty to preserve the author’s voice. Tytler (1791)<sup>[8]</sup> articulated three classic principles of translation—faithfulness in content, consistency in style, and fluency. Li Zhiping (2009)<sup>[4]</sup> advocated a return to the linguistic essence of translation, criticizing the over-extension of rewriting as a creative activity.

The Ideological Criticism School argues that rewriting is often a manifestation of ideological control. Translators, intentionally or not, become agents of ideological reproduction through additions, omissions, or transformations of the original text. Lefevere (1992)<sup>[3]</sup> and Venuti (1995)<sup>[5]</sup> highlight the ideological power embedded in translation decisions. Zhao Wenjing (2022)<sup>[16]</sup>, Xu Min (2019)<sup>[14]</sup>, and Li Zhiqi (2018)<sup>[5]</sup> demonstrate how translators may align with or resist dominant ideologies through their rewriting strategies.

Finally, the Creative Treason School highlights the translator’s artistic agency, proposing that rewriting can serve as a legitimate act of re-creation within the bounds of cultural and linguistic transfer. Xu Min (2019)<sup>[14]</sup> introduced the notion of “creative treason” as a necessary tension between fidelity and artistic freedom. Wang Jia (2020)<sup>[11]</sup> explored this in the context of translating English film titles, while Xu Jun (2020)<sup>[13]</sup> discussed the balance between adaptation and faithfulness in the English rendering of classical Chinese texts such as *The Analects*.

In summary, rewriting in translation is not a monolithic practice but a complex and dynamic strategy negotiated across multiple dimensions—cultural, functional, linguistic,

ideological, and creative. These theoretical perspectives offer complementary frameworks that illuminate the translator’s role as both mediator and rewriter.

## Rewriting Strategy in the English Edition of Lectures on China’s Traditional Political Thoughts

The selection and application of rewriting strategies are the result of the translator’s initiative. Based on an analysis of the characteristics of the original Chinese edition of *Lectures on China’s Traditional Political Thoughts*, and driven by the goal of spreading Chinese traditional political culture and expanding the audience’s acceptance, the project team decided to adopt specific rewriting strategies. These strategies are not only a means to enhance cultural exchange but also a necessary choice to balance academic rigor with popularization. The translator’s control over the extent of rewriting determines whether a culture is actively or passively presented in the process of international dissemination. Over-accommodating the target language audience may lead to a loss of the original cultural characteristics, making the cultural exchange less effective.

### 1. Adjustment of Pronouns

From a pragmatic perspective, adjustments were made to pronouns to soften the subjective viewpoint, adapting to the needs of cross-cultural communication. In the original text, the first-person pronoun “I” was rewritten as “the author”, and the more forceful “we” was rendered as “one” or “people”, transforming explicit, strong calls to action into more implicit and mild ones. This change guides readers of the translation to reflect on the relevance of Chinese traditional political culture from the universal perspective of human societal development, aiming to present Chinese culture in a more objective manner, enhancing the acceptability of the translation and meeting the demands of cross-cultural communication.

### 2. Conciseness of Expressions

The original text, based on the author’s lecture notes, inevitably contained some repetitive phrases meant to emphasize certain points. The translation condensed some adjacent repetitive sentences and removed redundant secondary information to improve the reading flow.

For example, in the original text on p.8:

“这就是民族的政治文化史、政治思想史、政治学说史

· 等等 · 如中国政治文化史、政治思想史、政治学说史

。” The translation reads: “That is the history of political culture, political thoughts, and political doctrine etc. of a nation, such as that of China’s.” The repeated phrase “history of political culture, political thought, and political doctrines” is replaced by “that” to avoid redundancy.

Another example is from pp. 11-12:

“我们考察研究中西两种政治思想史 · 首先会发现各自

突出的重心不同 · 也即其所研究的具体着重点有所差异

。” This sentence is similar to the one on p.25. The

translation reads: “When examining the history of Chinese and Western political thoughts, we will first find they differ from one another in their specific focuses.” Instead of translating as “focus” and “emphasis” separately, which would sound redundant, the translator condensed and merged the expressions.

### 3. Unification of Expressions

The author mentions in the postscript that the various sections are works created at different periods. The project team found some errors in the original text besides content repetition, such as a typo on p.75: “Shushu Tong” should be “Shusun Tong”, and on p.73, the quote from *The Analects* “Without learning the rites, one cannot stand” should actually come from *The Analects: Ji Shi*, rather than from the chapter Yao Yue.

Additionally, there were instances of referring to the same thing by different names. For example, “The Songs of the Five Sons” appear for three times in the source text (on pp.27, 51, 71), or references to “Yin Dynasty” (pp.30, 49) or simply “Yin” (p.49).

Such subtle differences in expressions could confuse Western readers unfamiliar with Chinese culture. If left unadjusted in pursuit of faithfulness, they may hinder effective cultural exchange. To ensure a smoother reading experience for the audience, the translator corrected factual errors and standardized the translation. For example, “The Songs of the Five Sons” was unified as *The Book of Documents: The Songs of the Five Sons*, and the term “Yin Dynasty” was rendered consistently as “the Shang Dynasty”. Footnotes were added where “Yin” was mentioned, explaining that “Yin” refers to the capital of the Shang Dynasty, from which the term “Yin people” is derived.

### Conclusion

This paper set out to investigate the rewriting strategies employed in the English translation of Xu Datong’s *Lectures on China’s Traditional Political Culture*, a work that intricately combines academic rigor with ideological mission. Drawing upon Lefevere’s theory of rewriting and subsequent developments in translation studies, the analysis has demonstrated that the translator’s task extends far beyond linguistic conversion. It entails ideological repositioning, cultural recontextualization, and discursive adaptation.

The findings suggest that the translation adopts multiple rewriting strategies to facilitate cross-cultural comprehension while maintaining the integrity of the source text’s ideological underpinnings. For example, simplification is employed to make complex Chinese political concepts more accessible to English-speaking readers, especially those unfamiliar with Marxist or Confucian terminology. Addition and elaboration are often used to provide necessary background or explanatory notes, helping to bridge cultural gaps. Omissions, in some cases, are tactfully executed to downplay politically sensitive or overly localized content that might not resonate with a global audience.

Cultural substitution and adaptation are also notable. Terms with heavy cultural or historical connotations are often rendered into their nearest functional equivalents or are explained through footnotes and parenthetical remarks. This strategy allows the translator to preserve the cultural richness of the source text while ensuring readability and academic acceptability in the target culture. More subtly, ideological reframing can be observed in how certain Marxist or nationalist expressions are toned down, reformulated, or embedded within broader universalist discourses of justice, equality, or governance.

Through this analysis, it becomes evident that translation is not a neutral act but a process laden with ideological and cultural negotiations. The translator of Xu’s work performs the role of a cultural ambassador, consciously reshaping the text to align with the discursive norms and political sensitivities of Western academic publishing. This echoes the theoretical claim of the cultural school that translation is a form of rewriting subject to the forces of poetics, ideology, and patronage.

Moreover, the study underscores the translator’s agency in constructing a hybrid discourse that blends Chinese and Western political idioms. This hybridization not only enhances the accessibility of Chinese thought to international readers but also reflects the broader dynamics of cultural globalization, where ideas are constantly reinterpreted and reframed across linguistic and ideological boundaries.

In conclusion, the English version of *Lectures on China’s Traditional Political Thoughts* exemplifies how rewriting strategies serve as crucial tools in translating politically and culturally dense texts. It highlights the necessity of balancing fidelity to the original with the functional and ideological expectations of the target audience. As Chinese political philosophy continues to gain attention on the global stage, translators will increasingly bear the responsibility of mediating not just language, but entire worldviews. Understanding rewriting as both a theoretical and practical strategy enables more nuanced, responsible, and effective cross-cultural communication in the realm of political translation.

### Note

Professor Xu D.’s (1928-2019) *Lectures on Traditional China’s Political Thoughts* was published in 2015. It is an important work of the project “Popularized Readers of Humanities and Social Science” Sponsored by the Ministry of Education. Mr. Xu, D. introduced the thoughts in plain language in a simple way. His theoretical insights of fundamental issues on traditional China’s political thoughts are elucidated from 10 angles. In particular, the interpretation of the political thoughts of Confucianism, Mohism, Taoism, and Legalism in the pre-Qin period fully demonstrates the author’s strict and standardized academic training and profound academic skills.

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### Notes on Contributor

Dan Yang, professor in Yancheng Teachers University, has published five publications on English translation (*China under Empress Dowager Cixi*, *Dusk of Idols*, *Research on the Reform and Innovation of English Translation Teaching in Universities*, *Lectures on China’s Traditional Political Thoughts*, *Up to the North*). She’s presently hosting the project “Lectures on China’s Traditional Political Thoughts” (English version) funded by “Chinese Fund for the

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