

Chinese Translations of *The Little Prince* in Taiwan:



Problems, Errors and Misunderstandings

One sees clearly only with the heart.
Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.
~Antoine de Saint-Exupery



The Little Prince

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The Little Prince
(*Le Petit Prince*)
has been
translated into
more than 180
languages and
sold more than 80
million copies.

Introduction

- In *The Little Prince*, Saint-Exupéry imagines himself stranded in the Sahara Desert where he meets a young extra-terrestrial prince.
- In their conversations, the author reveals his own views about the follies of mankind and the simple truths that people seem to forget as they grow older.
- Since World War II, this classic has been translated into more than 180 languages.
- This study aims at exploring whether Chinese translations published in Taiwan are accurate and if they have improved over the years.
- It will analyze 20 Chinese translations (1987-2010) and show that most of them contain all kinds of errors.

Part I. Saint-Exupéry and *The Little Prince*

Antoine de
Saint-
Exupéry
(1900-1944),
born in Lyon,
France
French writer
and pilot



a. Saint-Exupéry, his life and work

- In 1921, Saint-Exupéry began his military service and was sent to Strasbourg for training as a pilot.
- He became one of the pioneers of international postal flight; he kept writing and flying until World War II.
- Married in 1931 Consuelo Suncin, a Salvadoran-French writer and artist.
- In 1944, Saint-Exupéry's plane crashed in the Mediterranean and disappeared.
- In 1998, a fisherman found Saint-Exupéry's silver chain bracelet in the ocean south of Marseille.
- Investigators confirmed that the twisted wreckage of a Lockheed P-38 Lightning, extracted in October 2003, was Saint-Exupéry's.

a. Saint-Exupéry, his life and work

- Saint-Exupéry's work is greatly inspired by his experiences as a pilot:
- *L'aviateur* (1926) (*The Aviator*)
- *Courrier sud* (1929) (*Southern Mail*)
- *Vol de nuit* (1931) (*Night Flight*)
- *Terre des Hommes* (1939) (*Wind, Sand and Stars*)
- *Pilote de Guerre* (1942) (*Flight to Arras*)
- *Lettre à un Otage* (1943) (*Letter to a Hostage*)
- *Le Petit Prince* (1943) (*The Little Prince*)
- *Citadelle* (1948) (*The Wisdom of the Sands*), posthumous.

b. *The Little Prince*



b. *The Little Prince*

- Saint-Exupéry's novel, 1943; written near New York in 1942.
- Profound and idealistic points about life and love in time of war.
- The writer imagines himself lost in the Sahara desert after a plane crash.
- He meets a young extra-terrestrial prince in search of friends.
- The prince lives on an asteroid, B612, which has three volcanoes and a rose.
- The Prince leaves one day to see what the rest of the universe is like, and visits several other asteroids each of which is inhabited by an adult who is foolish in his own way.
- Then, he visits Earth where he meets lots of roses, a fox, an aviator and a snake who bites him, so he can go back to his asteroid.

Part II. Chinese Translations

- Over the years, many Chinese translations have been published, notably in Taiwan.
- However, they seem to repeat the same errors and to show little improvement. Some of these translations edit the French text, but it is filled with typos.
- Most of the translators do not speak French and publish English to Chinese translations. Very few translators acknowledge their sources and provide a bibliography.
- What English version are they using? Is this version reliable? What if the English translation contains mistakes and misunderstandings?
- This paper will analyze 20 Chinese versions published over a period of 23 years, from 1987 to 2010.

a. French and English versions

- The original French version dates from 1943. On 20, 4 Chinese translations edit the French text.
- One is bilingual Chinese-French edition and 3 are trilingual Chinese-French-English.
- There are 5 different English translations of *The Little Prince*. Woods' version of 1943 was followed by Cuffe (1995), Testot-Ferry (1995), Wakeman (1995), and Howard (2000).
- On 20, 7 Chinese translations edit the English text.
- Most editions don't acknowledge what English version they used.
- In fact, all of them use Woods' version.



b. Typos in bilingual French-Chinese versions

- The 4 books editing the French text contain a very large number of typos.
- It is disturbing that they often make the same mistakes on the same words:

“La fleur, un jour, avait vu passer une caravane” (chapter 18)

“La fleur, un jour, avait vu passer une caravanss” (張譯, 1999)

“La fleur, un jour, avait vu passer une caravanss” (李淑貞, 2002)

“La fleur, un jour, avail vu passer une caravanss” (張譯, 2006)

- 張譯 (1999) and 李淑貞 (2002) contain the same mistake; 張譯 (2006) adds one more typo.
- The mistake on “seriéuses” in chapter 7 probably shows that the person in charge of typing cannot speak French.
- The plethora of typos makes all these books unreliable.

c. Errors in the English translation

- Woods' translation contains many mistakes that are not challenged by the Chinese translators such as:
- “Il était une fois un petit prince qui habitait une planète à peine plus grande que lui, et qui avait besoin d'un **ami**...” (ami: friend)
- “Once upon a time there was a little prince who lived on a planet that was scarcely any bigger than himself and who had need of a **sheep**...”
- “很久以前，有一個小王子住在一個比自己大不了多少的小行星上，他非常渴望有一隻**綿羊**……”

d. “I am tried” in chapter 5

- All of the Chinese versions editing the English text contain the same mistake: “I am tried” in chapter 5.
- It is not a typo for “I am tired”:
- “La réponse est bien simple : J’ai essayé mais je n’ai pas pu réussir.” (“The answer is quite simple: I have tried but I did not succeed.”)
- Woods’ translation: “The reply is simple. I have tried. But with the others I have not been successful.”
- It is disturbing for many reasons: none of the Chinese translators challenged this error; however, it was correctly translated (for example “我試過了”).
- Around half of these translations omit “with the others”. It was added by Woods. It cannot be found in the original French text. Few respect the original punctuation.

In 2003, a
small asteroid
moon was
named **Petit-
Prince**



Part III. Lost in translation: *tu* and *vous*

a. The *tu/vous* distinction

- It does not exist in English. The second person subject pronoun is *you*, no matter how many people are concerned and no matter how close they are.

In French, the second person subject pronouns can be:

- *tu*, the familiar and singular form, demonstrates a certain closeness and informality (你 in Chinese)
- *vous*, the formal or polite singular form (您 in Chinese)
- *vous*, the plural *you* addressing more than one person, no matter how close (你們 or 您們 in Chinese).

Addressing	The little prince	Signification
The pilot	<i>S'il <u>vous</u> plaît...</i> <i>Dessine<u>-</u>moi un mouton</i> <i><u>Tu</u> vois bien.</i>	<i>Vous</i> polite when asking for something, addressing someone older. Become close friends, very intimate, son to father relationship.
The rose	<i>Que <u>vous</u> êtes belle!</i> <i>Je <u>te</u> demande pardon.</i>	Aristocratic, courtly and chivalrous (he is a prince). The rose also says <i>vous</i> to the little prince just as Consuelo and Antoine used to address each other. The rose to the prince who is about to leave her. In time of distress, they switch to <i>tu</i> .
The king	<i>Approche-<u>toi</u> que je <u>te</u> voie mieux.</i> <i><u>Sire</u>...lui dit-il, je <u>vous</u> demande pardon de <u>vous</u> interroger...</i>	The king says <i>tu</i> to a subject. Very polite; respect for the king (protocol).
Conceited Man	<i><u>Vous</u> avez une drôle de chapeau.</i> <i>Mais <u>tu</u> es seul sur ta planète!</i>	Respect at first. This man just lost the prince's respect for being so egocentric and vain.

The Drunkard	<i>Que fais-tu là?</i>	Difficult to respect someone who looks so bad. Friendly attitude toward a man who seems to be very sad.
The Businessman	<i>Votre cigarette est éteinte.</i> <i>Hein? Tu es toujours là?</i> <i>Et que fais-tu de ces étoiles?</i>	Respect. Cannot spontaneously be friendly with this man. Disdain for the prince bothering him in his serious work. The Businessman has lost the prince's respect.
The Lamplighter	<i>Pourquoi viens-tu d'éteindre ton réverbère?</i>	The prince treats him like a close friend. Sympathetic towards his mission.
The Geographer	<i>Que me conseillez-vous d'aller visiter?</i>	A geographer is not a traveler, but geography is very important to Saint-Exupéry who is a pilot. Respect.
The snake	<i>Tu es une drôle de bête.</i>	In French, people say <i>tu</i> to animals.
The fox	<i>Tu es bien joli...</i>	
Railway switchman	<i>Que fais-tu ici?</i>	Ordinary people. Friendly attitude.
Merchant of pills	<i>Pourquoi vends-tu ça?</i>	

b. “S’il vous plaît...dessine-moi un mouton!”

- The French reader would expect the little prince to say: “S’il vous plaît...dessinez-moi un mouton!” But here, the prince is breaking the conventions.
- On the one hand, a young child would generally use “vous” to address an adult, especially on their first encounter. That is why the little prince says “s’il vous plaît”. The familiar form would be “s’il te plaît”.
- On the other hand, it is quite common for children to say “tu” to everybody.
- None of these 20 versions correctly renders the *tu/vous* distinction.
- Only 1 version translates “s’il vous plaît” by 請您.

b. “S’il vous plaît...dessine-moi un mouton!”

- Few translations respect the original punctuation (ellipsis, exclamation mark...).
- “S’il vous plaît” and “s’il te plaît” are both translated by 請你
- Neither the French to Chinese nor the English to Chinese translations are correct.
- A more correct translation in Chinese would be: “請您...你幫我畫一隻綿羊！” It is strange and unexpected.
- Something happens between “請您” and “你幫我畫一隻綿羊！” The little prince’s attitude is changing, from formal to friendly.
- There is also a sense of urgency. We note that he does not introduce himself to the pilot. There is no time for that: he needs a sheep, quickly.

Musical composed by Richard Cocciante; 2002; Daniel Lavoie, singing Frolo in Notre Dame, is Saint-Exupéry



Conclusion

- The number of French to Chinese translations of *The Little Prince* has not increased, despite the fact that more students learn French at school, notably in secondary schools.

Some advices:

- Translators should clearly acknowledge the source text used.
- French should be typed by someone who actually learned it.
- Translators and translations companies should take the punctuation of the source text more seriously and respect it.
- They should challenge the mistakes found in the English text.
- It would be better to make a French to Chinese translation, with the help of a native French speaker who understands the cultural background.

50 francs



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*The Little
Prince*
drawing by
Jessie Chen

