

A Study on the Variations Phenomenon of Foreign Literature in Chinese Language Textbooks

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Abstract: Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken* underwent significant variation in the People's Education Press textbook. Its content shifted from a trivial, philosophical incident to a momentous life decision, and its theme evolved from quiet reflection to didactic moral instruction. Such variations in adapting foreign literature are ubiquitous and warrant urgent scholarly attention.

Keywords: Foreign literature; Textbook adaptation; Literary variation; *The Road Not Taken*; Chinese language textbooks

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Foreign literary works in Chinese textbooks serve a moral education mission, necessitating "textbook adaptation" that inevitably alters the original text. The following illustrates this phenomenon.

Two Foreign Poems, Lesson 19, Volume Two of Grade Seven (Ministry of Education Edition), includes Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*. The original English poem reads as follows ^[1]:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,/ And sorry I could not travel both/ And be one traveler, long I stood/ And looked down one as far as I could/ To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair, / And having perhaps the better claim, / Because it was grassy and wanted wear; / Though as for that the passing there/ Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay/ In leaves no step had trodden black. / Oh, I kept the first for another day! / Yet knowing how way leads on to way, / I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh/ Somewhere ages and ages hence: / Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —/ I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference.

The poem depicts an ordinary, unremarkable scene: while walking in the woods, the narrator hesitates between two nearly identical paths and chooses one, lamenting the slim chance of ever returning to explore the other and see its unique sights.

A common translation follows ^[2]:

未走之路

金色的树林中有两条岔路，/ 可惜我不能沿着两条路行走；/ 我久久地站在那分岔的地方，/ 极目眺望其中一条路的尽头，/ 直到它转弯，消失在树林深处。

然后我毅然踏上了另一条路，/ 这条路也许更值得我向往，/ 因为它荒草丛生，人迹罕至；/ 不过说到其冷清与荒凉，/ 两条路几乎是一模一样。

那天早晨两条路都铺满落叶，/ 落叶上都没有被踩踏的痕迹。/ 唉，我把第一条路留给将来！/ 但我知道人世间的阡陌纵横，/ 我不知将来能否再回到那里。

我将会一边叹息一边叙说，/ 在某个地方，在很久很久以后：/ 曾有两条小路在树林中分手，/ 我选了一条人迹稀少的行走，/ 结果后来的一切都截然不同。

In *Selected Foreign Philosophical Poems*, Gu Zixin renders the poem as follows ^[3]:

未选择的路

黄色的树林里分出两条路，/ 可惜我不能同时去涉足，/ 我在那路口久久伫立。/ 我向着一路路极目望去，/ 直到它消失在丛林深处。

但我选了另外一条路，/ 它荒草萋萋，十分幽寂，/ 显得更诱人，更美丽；/ 虽然在这两条小路上，/ 都很少留下旅人的足迹。

那天清晨落叶满地，/ 两条路都未经脚印污染。/ 啊，留下一条路等改日再见！/ 但我知道路径延绵无尽头，/ 恐怕我难以再回返。

也许多少年后在某个地方，/ 我将轻声叹息将往事回顾：/ 一片树林里分出两条路——/ 而我选择了人迹更少的一条，/ 从此决定了我一生的道路。

Gu's translation diverges from the original in three significant variations. First of all, it elevates physical "roads" to symbolic "life paths." Second, it translates "take" as "choose" ("选择"), emphasizing psychological intent. While "take" merely implies walking, "choose" instead means attitude and stance. Third, it amplifies the differences between the two roads, portraying one as "more tempting, more beautiful" and granting it the power to determine one's life.

In short, Frost's seemingly similar roads were rewritten by Gu into two different roads. While Gu's translation captures the poem's philosophy, it introduces an internal contradiction: "虽然在这两条小路上，都很少留下旅人的足迹。" ("Though as for that the passing there/ Had worn them really about the same"). It's hard to declare that one of the similar roads has the magic power to "determine my entire life."

Compilers excised this contradictory line to streamline the text ^[4], changing "虽然在这两条小路上，都很少留下旅人的足迹" ("Though as for that the passing there/ Had worn them really about the same") to "虽然在这条小路上，很少留下旅人的足迹。" ("Though upon this small road, few travelers had left their footprints.") This edit polarizes the two roads: one becomes the path of the minority, the other the conventional beaten path.

Furthermore, the edit twists the comparative "less" into an absolute marker of rarity, and attributes "overgrown with wild grass" ("它荒草萋萋，十分幽寂") to the less-traveled road, contrary to Frost's original text where the roads were nearly identical.

In other words, to this day there are at least three versions:

1. The original text tells an ordinary philosophical incident whose theme lies in the fact that inevitable choices between roads leave people with a sense of reluctance.

2. Gu Zixin's translation anchors its philosophical connotation in the choice of life trajectories. It

reshapes the central theme to focus on the unavoidability of life decisions, arousing subtle sentimental sentiments within the audience.

3. The textbook erases the roads' similarity, abolishing the distinctions between them and urging caution in life decisions. Thus, natural roads are elevated to life paths, with the tone shifting from tender sentiment to moral preaching.

Not only that, but the textbook compilers reinforce this theme through lesson arrangement, introductory reading prompts, and post-text discussion exercises.

The People's Education Press pairs *The Road Not Taken* with Pushkin's *If by Life You Were Deceived*. The unified introduction asks: "If life deceives you, how will you respond?" and "How should you navigate [life's] choices?" The introductory reading prompts imply that the theme of the poem concerns life choices^[5]. Post-text discussion exercises reinforce this by asking students to explain the "profound symbolic meaning" of the roads^[6], guiding them to deduce morals like "Choice, not chance, determines destiny" and "life offers no second chances," etc.^[7].

The Teacher's Instruction Manual further confirms the above tendency, asserting^[8]: "Human lives are often compared to walking a road... Natural trails can be revisited... yet life's paths are like arrows shot from a bow—impossible to retrieve." It adds that the poet chooses the challenging, less-traveled path over the "bland" majority path, initiating a "difficult trek"^[9]. Three biases stand out in the manual: First, it cements the life-choice metaphor. Second, it polarizes the paths, framing the less-traveled path as an honorable choice and the mainstream as banal conformity^[10]. Third, it suggests teaching in three levels: nature, sentiment, and life philosophy, moving from surface to depth and from learning to practice^[11]. At last, it invents details, depicting the journey as a "grueling struggle" absent in the original^[12].

To evaluate fairly: Gu's translation is "creative treason"—simplifying the original's subtlety but resonating with readers. In contrast, the textbook revisions likely stem from compilers unfamiliar with the English original, turning creative reimagining into misrepresentation. The Teacher's Manual compounds this by inventing a struggle that doesn't exist.

This phenomenon is not isolated; it pervades Chinese textbooks. For instance, Andersen's *The Ugly Duckling* shifts from a self-portrait to a moral lesson on persistence^[13]; Chekhov's *The Man in a Case* is cut to a character sketch, losing its social critique^[14,15]; and Wilde's *The Selfish Giant* replaces aesthetic symbolism with simple moral instruction^[16,17]; and *My Uncle Jules*, originally a fiction about local customs and human relationships^[18], is now interpreted as a critique of money worship in capitalist society, etc. The causes and implications of these variations demand critical reflection from educators in China.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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