

The Analysis of the Status of Contemporary Chinese Literature

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Abstract

In the context of globalization, as China is becoming an important character on the world stage, Chinese literature's mission is to be known by the world, and Chinese literature is poised to change the shared cultural landscapes in the world. However, contemporary Chinese literature is not as popular in the world as Western literature in spite of the implementation of "going out" strategy. Chinese literature, in the age of globalization, is increasingly marginalized by world literature. Some scholars hold the idea that for Chinese literary seeking recognition in the realm of world literature, the most formidable challenge to improve the status of Chinese literature at present is either ensuring the proper translation into English or securing the target readers' access to them. The most important point is that the target readers' need to be contextually activated and to become actively present in the world literary system.

Based on the current international situation, the paper introduces a brief introduction of modern Chinese literature, some performances of the marginalization of modern Chinese literature and analyses the reasons why Chinese literature is not well received as Western literature. The paper is rounded off with suggestions from certain aspects as to what we can do to improve the status of Chinese literature.

Key words: Status of Chinese literature; World literature; Modern literature; Marginalization

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INTRODUCTION

Modern Chinese literature can be dated back to 1919, with the movement called the Literary Revolution. In coexistence and interaction of multi-cultures, it is well recognized that China cannot develop without the rest of the world, and the world cannot enjoy prosperity and stability without China in the context of globalization. Much as we want to bring contemporary Chinese literature to the world, as one of the carriers of traditional Chinese culture, it is marginalized by world literature.

In this paper, it is pointed out several major performances showing that modern Chinese literature is tainted with prejudices in the Western world.

First, translation is playing a much more significant role in making China's literary works accessible to non-Chinese readers. In the global context, for Chinese literary seeking recognition in the realm of world literature, it is crucial to ensure the proper translation into English. Depressingly, the influence of classic literature translation into English and some modern literature in China are not great enough. With the implementation of "going out" strategy, translation is undoubtedly facing new challenges.

Secondly, among the five prizes provided for in Alfred Nobel's will (1895), one was intended for the person who, in the literary field, had produced "the most outstanding work in an ideal direction" (Espmark, 1999), in China, only Mo Yan has won Nobel Literature Prize during the long process of Chinese literature history, which means

that Chinese literature has little influence over the world literature as the Nobel Prize in Literature has become the world's most prestigious literature prize. To make matters worse, only few Chinese literary works won World Literary Prizes, which signifies that Chinese literature gets scant recognition by world literature.

Thirdly, the teaching mode of Chinese language and literature faces a series of challenges and dilemma, which lies in taking the teacher as the center, emphasizing the teacher's "teaching" but neglecting students' "learning", and centering on "how to teach" in the teaching designs.

Furthermore, with the diversification of leisure recreational activities, it is acknowledged that reading is ignored by the whole nation, not to mention Chinese literature.

In the latter part of the paper, there is a brief introduction of the history and development of Chinese literature and it is also pointed out several reasons why contemporary Chinese literature is not well received by world literature, including historical, cultural, social and economic factors. In addition, based on the introduction and specific analyses, some suggestions on how to put emphasis on contemporary Chinese literature will be given, which may be conducive to improve the status of Chinese literature.

1. INTRODUCTION OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE LITERATURE

1.1 The Brief Introduction of History of Chinese Literature

The history of Chinese literature extends more than 5000 years, from the earliest recorded dynastic court archives to the mature vernacular fiction novels that arose during the Ming Dynasty to entertain lots of people. Ancient Chinese literature is the treasure in Chinese civilization and one of the irreplaceable parts in the history of world literature, which influences the world culture and civilization. There has been quantities of excellent literature works since ancient times in China and most of them are translated into different languages and distributed throughout the world. For instance, *The Book of Song*, *The Art of War*, Tang Poems, Song Ci, Yuan Qu and Four Great Classical Novels. The status of ancient Chinese literature within national scholarly circles are unparalleled.

The Art of War, for example, is the maximum classic in China Military Science dating from the 5th century BC. It is a study of the anatomy of organizations in conflict compiled well over two thousand years ago. It is perhaps the most prestigious and influential book of strategy in the world today (Tzu, 2005). And it has played an indispensable part in Western military thinking, business tactics, legal strategy and beyond. *The Art of War* has been translated into 29 versions and widely disseminated in the

world. Generally speaking, Chinese antiquity literature, is a gem in the history of Chinese literature.

Modern Chinese literature date from 1919, with the movement called the Literary Revolution, and the author Lu Xun (1881-1936) is considered the founder of vernacular literature in China.¹

1.2 Development of Contemporary Chinese Literature

It is well recognized that novel stands firm as a rock in mid-stream in world literature currently. However, over the long process of Chinese history, classical style of writing was the main stream and modern Chinese literature did not erupt suddenly until the late Qing period. In Qing Dynasty, China was always making concessions to Western powers. From then on intellectuals began to seek solutions to solve China's internal and external problems, poverty and weakness. Indeed, the Westernization Movement advocated "Chinese Learning as the Fundamental Structure, Western Learning for Practical Use". Thus, at the very beginning, they translated works of Western expository writing and literature, which enriched their cognition of the west and enabled Chinese to gain an exposure to a new exotic cultures. The 20th Century witnessed Chinese literature to have transformed dramatically from the old era to the new one. Its development kept up with the pace of Chinese modernization.

Then, in the New Culture Movement (1915-1923), intellectuals like Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Lu Xun, and Hu Shih began to lead a revolt against Confucianism and advocated the creation of a new Chinese culture, which is based on Western standards. They strongly called for the doctrine of "advocating new literature and rejecting old literature", which is the beginning of modern Chinese literature, and the real outset of China's acceptance of Western literature. Additionally, Western literature had developed rapidly in the field of fiction.

For the next sixty years, modern Chinese literature developed slowly because of political disturbances. For instance, The Communist Party of China had established a base after the Long March in Yan'an. The literary ideals of the League were being simplified and enforced on writers and "cultural workers." In 1942, Mao Zedong gave a series of lectures called *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature* that clearly made literature subservient to politics via the Yan'an Rectification Movement.²

Then, the Communists gradually nationalized the publishing industry, centralized the book distribution system, and brought writers under institutional control through the Writers Union. A system of strict censorship was implemented, with Mao's "Yan'an Talks" as the

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_literature#Modern_literature

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_literature#Republican_Era_281912.E2.80.9349.29

guiding force. Periodic literary campaigns targeted figures such as Hu Shih and other figures from the New Culture period, especially Hu Feng, a protege of Lu Xun who, along with his wife Mei Zhi, did not toe the Party line on literature' (Zhang, 2008). Socialist realism became the uniform style, and many Soviet works were translated.

In 1966, Mao Zedong judged that with the purpose of restoring capitalism, the rebels had infiltrated the bourgeois elements to the government and society at large. To eliminate the rivals within the Communist Party, Mao insisted that these "revisionists" be removed through violent class struggle and launched the Cultural Revolution wrongly. In the period of Cultural Revolution, revolutionary model opera was one of the most prominent works in the open literature, which is a typical embodiment of the intellectuals who were being destroyed and suppressed in the field of literature. The policy of reformation and open-up has created an unprecedented superior social environment for the vigorous development of Chinese Literature, and it reached its heyday in 1980s. For example, Trauma fiction, reflecting the social life of the Cultural Revolution, had been once in boom and led to strong reaction in the new age literature.

At that time, the quantity of literary magazines rose sharply and the poetry also changed in its form and content. Four "misty poets," Bei Dao, Gu Cheng, Duo Duo and Yang Lian expressed themselves in deliberately obscure verse which reflected subjective realism rather than the realism of the sort promoted during the Cultural Revolution.³ In addition, a lot of foreign literary works were translated, and Chinese modern literature was influenced by foreign works more or less. Furthermore, Chinese writers were allowed to write in unconventional styles and to treat sensitive subject matter more freely.

2. THE PERFORMANCES OF THE MARGINALIZATION OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE LITERATURE

2.1 The Influence of Classic Literature Translations Into English

It is acknowledged that Chinese is quite different from other languages in European, Arabian and many other western countries. For Chinese literary seeking recognition in the realm of world literature, in the global context, it is crucial to ensure the proper translation into English. With the improvement of national comprehensive strength and the implementation of "going out" strategy, more and more classic literature

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_literature#Opening_and_Reform_281978.E2.80.931989.29

translations into English are walking towards the world. In the context of the introduction and translation of Chinese literature, translation is undoubtedly facing new challenges.

Some great novel writers, such as Yang Jiang, Lu Xun and others were literary translators themselves, and many famous writers in China nowadays, such as the Nobel laureate Mo Yan, held the view that translated works were sources of enlightenment and inspiration. Since he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012, scholars in the field of translation studies have been feverishly discussing the significance of translation, the relationship between translation strategies and methods, and the importance of translation in the spread of Chinese literature and culture. Mo Yan confessed that he would not win the Nobel Prize in literature without the excellent translation from a famous sinologist, Howard Goldblatt. Howard Goldblatt's translation is known for his deleting and rewriting of Mo Yan's texts. Whereas, some translators insist on the principle of faithfulness in translation, causing the poor recognition of the target readers. Some experts held the idea that literary translation models for translating Chinese literature should be based on a thorough reflection on faithfulness in translation, translation approaches and the imbalance of cultural acceptance.

The importance of translation has received unprecedented attention from the domestic media, academia and even ordinary readers. In 2005, the Chinese government started a sponsoring program for translations of government-approved Chinese works, which has already resulted in more than 200 books being translated from Chinese into other languages.⁴ It is worth mentioning that Chinese literature press launched a hundred of the "panda series" in 1981, which is of a high quality English version of Chinese classics and legends. However, "Panda series" almost stopped publishing in 2002, which also marked that the output of contemporary Chinese culture had encountered a staggering setback. Good translations must proceed from new cultural context and historical background, and the fundamental problems of translation such as translation methods, criteria, concepts and the values of translations involved should be reexamined.

2.2 International Literary Prizes in China

In spite of the implementation of "going out" strategy, Chinese literary works are not as popular as Western literature. Only few Chinese literary works won World Literary Prizes, for instance, the Nobel Prize in Literature, the Franz Kafka Prize, the Man Booker Prize for Fiction and etc.

Every barber knows that the Nobel Prize in Literature is awarded annually by the Swedish Academy to authors

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_literature#Chinese_Literature_in_Translation

for outstanding contributions in the field of literature. As of 2016, the Nobel Prize in Literature has been awarded to 113 individuals.⁵ The Chinese people have Nobel Prize complex as Nobel Prize in Literature is the most influential international literary award. Whereas, only Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize in Literature in the long process of Chinese literature history, which signifies that Chinese literature has little influence over the world literature. Chinese literature gets scant recognition by world literature.

Ma Yueran, academician of the Swedish Academy pointed out at a symposium that it is because the lack of excellent translations that the Chinese writers have not won the Nobel Prize for a long time. Ma said frankly that there are many good writers and good works in China, but there are too few good translations. He further explained that in accordance with the Nobel Prize winning principle, the deceased writer was ineligible to receive an award. If someone could translate *Call to Arms* and *Wandering* in 20s of the last century, Lu Xun would have won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

As we know, among eighteen academicians of the Swedish Academy, Ma is the only sinologist who can judge the merits of Chinese writers' works directly through reading Chinese character. Other judges can only rely on reading the English translations to determine whether the works are of high quality or not. Thus, to improve the quality of translations is a crucial factor to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

The Franz Kafka Prize, an international literary award presented in honor of a famous German language novelist, Franz Kafka. It is co-sponsored by the Franz Kafka Society and the city of Prague, Czech Republic. In China, only Yan Lianke, a famous writer with the high consciousness of the fiction style has won this prize. The Man Booker Prize for Fiction is a literary prize awarded for the best original novel. The winner of this Prize will receive international renown and success. Yan Lianke, who was shortlisted for a Man Booker International Prize in 2013. Whereas, so far no one in China has won this Prize. Chinese literature gets scant recognition by world literature due to the fact that few Chinese literary works won World Literary Prizes.

2.3 The Current Situation of Chinese Language and Literature Education

Chinese language and literature, as the name suggests, include two major subjects: language and literature. It is one of the earliest majors in the history of Chinese universities and a compulsory basic course in college education. The students who majoring in Chinese language and literature education are expected to be with

a rich fund of knowledge on Chinese culture, skillful technique and strong practice abilities.

However, at present, the teaching of Modern Chinese Literature faces a series of challenges and dilemma like irrational course structure, inaccurate orientation of teaching and etc. The current teaching mode of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature's blemish lies in taking the teacher as the center always, emphasizing the teacher's teaching but neglects students' learning ability, and centers on "how to teach" in the teaching designs.

The new reform requires students to have an excellent appreciation of literature and an adequate ability of expression, reading and writing. Thus, we should lay our efforts on constructing a scientific curriculum system and a teaching staff with both qualifications for teachers and vocational qualifications. These are effective methods to put emphasis on cultivating a good spreading messenger of Chinese literature.

Additionally, in recent years, most of students are transferred to Chinese literature major involuntarily because they are not matriculated by the specialties they declare, and are transferred to other specialties. And they are not willing to choose this major out of interest. As they do not like literature, there is no doubt that they would not become a good spreading messenger of the Chinese literature.

Another important reason is that the employment rate and the wages of this major are quite low due to the fact that the substitution of this major is quite strong, and it lacks the unique specialized skills. What is worth mentioning is that the teaching mode of this major in college is outdated and cannot meet the needs of the market. To alleviate the contradiction between social demand and personnel training, professional training mode reform of Chinese language and literature should be based on the cultivation of elitists, writing ability, vocational technical ability and professional qualities. The present employment situation of the graduates is severe. Due to the fact that literature jobs cannot provide stability and good wages, Chinese language and literature in college is not in popular demand. We have to admit that these factors are not conducive to the healthy development of literature.

It can be seen that there is still a great amount of Chinese literature of poor quality at present, for example, some network literature. According to a research done by the Social Research Centre of China Youth Daily, 88.8% interviewees read network fictions, but only 20% of them think the quality of network fictions is good and 30.7% of them express their disappointment of network fictions bluntly.⁶ As a matter of fact, the authors can express whatever they want on the Internet and it has become a way for people to make some unrealizable dreams.

⁵ "All Nobel Laureates in Literature". Retrieved 2008, October 16 from http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/. Nobel Foundation

⁶ China Youth Daily Sunzhen, 2013, p.1.

That's to say, they lack appropriate education and some professional literary knowledge.

2.4 Little Attention Is Paid to Chinese Literature

Chinese literature occupies an important position in the history of world literature, and is one of the indispensable parts of world literature. Ancient China was one of the cradles of world literature. There is a wealth of early Chinese literature dating from the Hundred Schools of Thought that occurred during the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770-256 BC), which has made a great contribution to the development of world literature.

However, due to various historical reasons, this understanding has not yet been completely accepted. In the 21st century, we embrace globalization. English has become the most popular language in the world. The introduction of world literature gives people an opportunity to appreciate the beauty of world literature. Thus, Chinese today have access to an unprecedented range of works from around the world in excellent translations. Therefore, people pay more attention to foreign works.

With the advent of network era and the diversification of leisure recreational activities, it is acknowledged that reading is ignored by the nation, not to mention Chinese literature. Depressingly, Chinese tend to concentrate on the high-tech digital devices instead of domestic literature. In other words, people have neglected the important and indispensable role of Chinese literature.

Some educators hold an idea that students should pay more attention to world famous literature. When reading world literary masterpieces, students can not only enhance the accumulation of the language, improving language literacy, expanding the scope of knowledge and improving humanistic literacy, but also enrich the spiritual world and temper volitional quality. Nevertheless, the fact is that students have long been overlooking the appreciation of domestic literature. In order to enhance our cultural identity and cultural self-confidence, we'd better pay more attention to domestic literature, especially the outstanding ones.

3. SEVERAL REASONS WHY CHINESE LITERATURE IS LESS POPULAR THAN WESTERN LITERATURE

3.1 Historical Reasons

For historical reasons, in the late Qing dynasty, the feudal rulers adopted a policy of seclusion, which hampered the progress of literature and its exchanges of culture with the outside world. And a sociopolitical movement called the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution took place in China from 1966 until 1976. There is no room for doubt that the seclusion policy and Cultural Revolution had baffled the development of literature to a great extent. At the

same time, emancipation movements in thought such as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment liberated science from religions superstitions, causing the western literature developed rapidly.

3.2 Cultural Factors

When it comes to cultural factors, in the process of globalization, with the invasion of Western culture, China is confronted with multicultural coexistence, conflict and contest. The thriving development of the network will bring a bright future for network literature, which enables Chinese to read some world literature. Some professors even required that their students spend more time on foreign literature to enrich the spiritual world and temper volitional quality. Actually, to learn from foreign literature is completely different from worshipping every foreign things. In fact, Chinese have long been pursuing world literature excessively and overlooking the reading of domestic literature. The government should build up citizens' cultural confidence by strengthening cultural competence and gain the right of saying on the world stage.

Since the different culture, modes of thinking, language, social formations and ideologies, it is not easy for Chinese literature to fight its way to be popularized in the world. When different cultural values and beliefs clash, cultural conflicts come into being. Without similar historical and cultural background, it is really very difficult for one to be deeply affected by the works if he had not experienced it himself. And we have shared the diversities of social systems, ideologies and culture ideas and both sides have contradictions and divergences unavoidably.

Ideology, a comprehensive set of normative beliefs, conscious and unconscious ideas, that an individual, group or society has. With the excessive interference in literature of nation's ideologies which require literature serve for politics, literary works score political marks of particular times which lack of lasting value. It is reasonable that the foreign readers would not like reading Chinese literature if they do not share the identical ideologies with Chinese.

Language in China is different from that in the English speaking countries, thus the spread of Chinese literary works mostly depends on translation. As for the evaluation on translated versions, the reproduction of meanings and functions in the target language determines the quality of translation. As Ma Yueran said, it is not the lack of excellent works, but the lack of excellent translations in China. Therefore, the quality of translation is of crucial importance.

3.3 Social Factors

As for social factors, throughout the whole process of education, literature, especially Chinese literature, it is not taken seriously. This is an impetuous era, this is a lost era.

Modern social psychology is quite impetuous and fickle, causing it difficult to produce outstanding literary works and to cultivate good writers.

As we all know, with the development of technology, we have to admit that we have entered a network era. Nowadays, with the diversification of leisure recreational activities, more and more people tend to spend less time on reading. According to a recent survey conducted by China Youth Daily, nearly 17% of the students in some certain colleges did not buy any one extra-curricular reading material, and 8% of the students never went to the library within one year.⁷ “The 13th National Reading Survey”, organized by Chinese Academy of press and publication was published on April 18th, 2016, showing that 4.58 paper books were read per capita in 2015, less than France (20), Japan (40) and Israel (60).⁸ We can draw a conclusion that reading is ignored by the whole nation, not to mention Chinese literature, which leads to the lack of great literature. As is known to all, it is very difficult to produce excellent literary works without groups of readership. Since fast-food culture to invade, makes the teaching of classic literature fails to win considerable effect. Faced with the culture shock, “fashion culture” and “snack culture”, the teaching of Chinese classical novels has encountered a lot of problems. Additionally, the impetuous social value makes it difficult for the literary workers to go deep into meditation to produce great literary works, causing the deficiency of outstanding cultural achievements of Chinese culture.

3.4 Economic Reasons

For economic reasons, economy is the foundation and culture is the reflection of economy and certain culture is determined by certain economy. Cultural globalization is characterized by the common consumption of cultures that have been spread by the Internet, Hollywood blockbusters, literature output and cultural penetration. In the economic globalization, cultural context of globalization, and cultural integration has become an irreversible trend of the times. The development of literature is closely related with economy. The impetus of economy to literature is in multiple dimensions.

Meanwhile, economically developed Western countries lead the cultural extension, which deeply influences the development of the traditional culture and domestic literature. The culture of western developed countries has the huge agents of penetration with the economy impetus. On the one hand, western developed countries have a strong influence on global cultural dominance that Chinese people are more willing to accept their culture, which demonstrates culture has a close relationship with the economy. On the other, many Chinese people worship

all things foreign, especially film literature. Coming to literature through films is a more sociable way of getting to know about traditional culture. In recent years, more Hollywood blockbusters are reaching Chinese theaters, which lead to serious cultural penetration. Advanced culture industry of the developed countries has corroded the economies of China.

4. HOW TO IMPROVE THE STATUS OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE LITERATURE

Chinese literature, is marginalized by world literature. If Chinese literature refuses to follow the main stream of world literature, it will be abandoned by the waves in the world history. Thus, measures should be taken to raise the status of Chinese literature in the world.

First, people should pay more attention on contemporary Chinese literature instead of focusing on world literature only. Citizens should be encouraged to enrich the amount of Chinese literature reading and become a good spreading messenger of the Chinese literature.

Second, another important measure is to improve the quality of literary translation, to be specific, to enhance the literariness of translated works. Literary translation models for translating Chinese literature should be based on a thorough reflection on faithfulness in translation, translation approaches and the imbalance of cultural acceptance. Good translations must proceed from new cultural context and historical background, and the fundamental problems of translation such as translation methods, criteria, concepts and the values of translations involved should be reexamined. Training translators are an important task which should be given a high priority. And the quality of domestic literature should be improved.

Next, the government should continue to reform the cultural management system, encouraging not only literary and art workers but also all citizens to produce more healthy and inspirational literary works to meet the diverse cultural needs of our people.

Finally, great attention should be paid to the edifying influence of Chinese literature education. More efforts should be lay on constructing a scientific curriculum system and a teaching staff with both qualifications for teachers and vocational qualifications, which can improve citizens' cultural identity and cultural self-confidence. And it is also beneficial to the spread of Chinese Literature.

CONCLUSION

Chinese literature occupies an important position in the history of world literature, and is one of the

⁷ *China Youth Daily*, 2007, p.1.

⁸ <http://book.sina.com.cn/news/v/2016-04-18/1723800806.shtml>

indispensable parts of world literature. However, modern Chinese literature is increasingly marginalized by world literature and it will be abandoned by the waves in the world history if it refuses to follow the main stream of world literature. To be conclude, the paper mainly tells us some performances of the marginalization of contemporary Chinese literature, analyses the main reasons why Chinese literature is not the main stream in the world literature, and gives us some suggestions on how to improve the status of modern Chinese literature. The status of contemporary Chinese

literature can be improved if every citizen works hard together.

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