



The Function of Translation in China in the Globalization Era Revisited

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Abstract

In the globalization era different peoples with different cultures and background communicate with one other. During this interpersonal and international communication, translation plays an indispensable and important role in reforming Chinese critical discourse. Also, the function of translation today in China has shifted from mere pursuing a language rendition to transmitting culture. This function shifting needs a balanced and equal exchange for the Chinese scholars to communicate with the international colleagues.

Key words: Globalization; Translation; Chinese culture

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1. THE EMERGING AND INFLUENCE OF GLOBALIZATION

Globalization is not something created by Chinese scholars, but like modernism, post-modernism, and other academic trends, are just borrowed from the west. Martin (1995) describes the world we are living in as an “electronic global village where through the mediation of information and communication technologies, new patterns of social and cultural organization are emerging”. (pp.11-12) In this global village, people with different cultural background and knowledge communicate with one another with the help of language. During this cultural

communication, translation is playing a more and more important role, connecting different cultures and different nations; in this global village, the sense of time and space is greatly compacted. When the American soldiers discovered and arrested the former Iraq President Saddam Hussein, thousands of people could watch this event before TV immediately this happened.

We cannot but recognize globalization is a ghost-like specter haunting our memory every now and then and influencing our cultural and intellectual life as well as our way of thinking and academic study. Thus, thinking globally and acting locally has become the urgent choice for both the intellectuals and people in the global village. If we take global village as a whole “context”, our life and thinking mode thus have been gradually contextualized by this omnipresent phenomenon. With the great influence of globalization on our daily life, the elite culture has been challenged by the popular culture. The humanities and social sciences are also severely challenged by the overload information. Take media as an example, the whole Britain has 10 national daily newspapers, 10 Sunday newspapers and altogether 1300 local newspapers. Put it in another way, each British people has to buy 2.8 pieces of newspapers per week (Tang, 2004). If other kinds of media are considered in Britain, we can image how the information floods into the daily life in this country. Just because the rapid exchange of information and convenient transportation, all the artificial constructions of the center have been deconstructed by the threatening of the capital and new division of international labor. In 1997, the Asian financial storm was initiated in one country but rapidly swept many others, even the countries outside the Asian area.

With the emerging of the globalization, a kind of identity crisis has become a problem facing many people, especially the young. Sometimes they become lost in the big cities and no longer find a spiritual support for their further living. This indicates that, globalization, on the one hand has brought us much convenience, and on the

other it has created many kinds of problems that have given much threat to our modern life. In this sense, we might well predict that globalization is really a ghost-like specter threatening our national mechanism, especially in the field of culture and literature. The question is: should we resist this phenomenon as strongly as possible or just accept it passively? The answer to this question is not so simple. We should first of all recognize that globalization gives rise to the interpenetrating processes of the universalization of particularism and the particularization of universalism (Wang, 2004, p.3). Following this assumption, the effect of globalization has two sides: on the one hand, it has threatening the local culture and identity construction, and on the other hand, it has the function as described by Fredric Jameson, "we have in this particular instance observed the endowment of the abstract of opposition of Identity and Difference with a specific content of unity versus multiplicity." (Jameson, 1998, p.73)

The above discussion shows that globalization is always juxtaposed with that of localization. That is to say, the process of globalization will meet the resistance of localization by means which a new meaning will be generated during this process, and thus in turn, will give more significance to the globalization. Since globalization has a more and more significant impact on culture, then what is the relationship between the two things? Jameson and Miyoshi have made the following statement.

I believe that globalization is a communication concept, which alternatively marks and transmits cultural and economic meanings, we have a sense that there are denser and more extensive communicational networks all over the world today, networks that are on the one hand the result of remarkable innovations in communicational technologies of all kinds, and on the other have as their foundations the tendentially greater degree of modernization in all the countries of the world, or at least in their big cities, which includes the implantation of such technologies." (Jameson and Miyoshi, 1998, p.55)

The above quotation means that globalization of culture is mainly carried by information which is a keynote in our modern society. The spreading of information will naturally leads to the globalization of culture.

2. TRANSLATION TURN: FROM LANGUAGE RENDITION TO CULTURE TRANSMISSION

During the process of information transmission in globalization era, translation plays an important role. Just as the name indicates that, translation means transmitting the meaning of one language into another. Translation thus involves two languages, a source language and a target language, between which translation functions as a bridge connecting two kinds of culture. Before we make further analysis of the function of translation in

the globalization era, it is necessary to have a brief look at the history of translation practice in China. And the development of translation studies in China clearly shows that translation practice has shifted from just pursuing a language rendition to representing the nuances of the cultural meaning in two different languages.

Luo and Lei (2004) has presented a clear picture of translation practice history in China. They pointed out four periods of stages as far as the translation practice in China is concerned. The first stage began at Han Dynasty, when the translation practice was mainly focused on the Buddhist documents. This translation practice continued until the Tang Dynasty. The second period was initiated by the foreign missionaries in 16th century. At that time the works translated was no longer Buddhist documents, but Christianity, science, and technology. More important is that many local Chinese scholars cooperated with these missionaries and made extra contribution to the translation studies in China. These people are Xu Guangqi, Li Tianjing, and so on. The third major stage began when China was forced open to the outside world during and after the Opium War. At this period, many pioneers in China "opened their eyes" to look at the outside world and then did a lot of translating work. Lin Zexu, a famous feudal official in Qing Dynasty, though well known for his great achievement in destroying the opium in the southeast coast of China, strongly held the view that only having a full understanding of the western world, could Qing Dynasty pushed back the invasion of the western forces. Just based on the above assumptions, he organized many scholars at that time to translate the foreign journals and books, as well as promoting to learn from the western world. Just because of his great and pioneer deed in translation studies, he was called by the famous contemporary scholar Fan Wenlan as "the first person to look at the world". Under his influence, many foreign works was translated from abroad and thus greatly stimulated the development of China's economy and political system. At the beginning of the 20th century, especially during and after the May Fourth Movement, the works translated shifted from the western studies to the western literature which was conducted by Lin Shu, Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, and so on. The new literature movement, marked by the May Fourth Movement thus found the typical embodiment of translation from west to east. This movement also functions as the enlightenment in China and destroys the foundation of the feudalism, thus paving the way for the coming bourgeois revolution in China. The fourth stage of translation practice in China, according to Luo and Lei, came into being with the foundation of the People's Republic of China. And this stage continues to the present time with a break during the Cultural Revolution. Owing to the peaceful and steady environment, translation practice in China has made great achievements; and the publications concerning translation studies, translation courses, and references books within

the 50 years, 634 works have come out, with 457 in the Mainland, 94 in Taiwan and 83 in Hong Kong. Also, many translation colleges have been set up both in foreign languages universities and in comprehensive universities. Translation studies in China has flourished, and no longer a practical skill used by some specialists and experts.

The above phenomenon is just the manifestation of the flourishing of translation practice. The underlying current of this prosperity of translation studies is the shifting function of translation. Put in another way, translation has shifting its function as a introduction of western science to reforming a special Chinese critical discourse, and thus greatly propelled the cultural transmission and mixture. The question will be picked up again in the coming section.

3. THE FORMATION OF CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

Although different theorists and scholars have different opinions about the definition and function of translation, translation is absolutely necessary to our daily life and interpersonal communication without which our life will be isolated from the outside world, especially in the age of globalization era. Just because of the utmost function of translation, many theorists want to find a universally-applied principle by which the translation practice and operation will be easily conducted. One of the recent examples finds particular embodiment in Eugene Nida's practical strategy, that is, his concept of dynamic equivalence, in which the translation "aims to complete naturalness of expression, and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of his own culture". (Nida 1964, p.159) This standard of translation, compared with Yan Fu's three-character criterion of translation, is a great improvement, since cultural elements have been considered into this matter. Yan Fu asserts that, during the translation process, maintaining the Xin (faithfulness), Da (expressiveness), and Ya (elegance) is a very important factor. But the problem lies in that he did not make a full and clear illustration and elaboration about what does this standard mean, and the fuzziness of the standard, as well as the lacking of cultural consideration makes this criterion a notorious one and thus lost in the international context.

Similar to Eugene Nida's translation standards, Jacques Derrida delivered a speech in 1998 at the fifteenth annual seminar of the Assises de la Traduction litteraire a Arles (ATLAS), having proposed the concept of "relevant translation". According to Derrida, a completely relevant translation is impossible, but a relatively "relevant translation" could be achieved. In Derrida's eyes, any sense of center of finality of Truth or authenticity has been deconstructed in the process of a deconstructive reading and interpretation. Apparently, in Derrida's theoretical concept, we have already seen a shift of focus

in translation from "purely linguistic rendition to dynamic and cultural interpretation and representation. In Derrida's sense, the translator is more or less a revisionist rather than a traitor, and this shift thus liberated the translator's subjectivity in doing translation practice.

The above idea concerning the cultural translation is further pushed forward by Wang Ning. Wang once practiced some translation, but mostly theoretical translation and cultural interpretation. He holds that literal translation in certain context is absolutely essential, especially in the translation of scientific documents. While in literary translation, it is very important to represent the very subtle meaning between the lines and even behind the lines. The connotations and nuances in literary works are hard to translate if the form is put in the highest position in translation practice. Thus cultural factors are the first thing to be considered in doing literary translation. Wang's words indicates a clear demarcation between two kinds of translations, one is the linguistic perspective and the other, cultural perspective. Actually speaking, the linguistic perspective always finds no way to represent the subtle difference between the two languages. Obviously, these two approaches to translation should be put in a hierarchical way with cultural approach in the controlling position. The ideology or cultural factors constitute the meaning resources of language, especially for the literary works, and this meaning resource is further represented or realized by language symbols or systems. Following this assumption, if we put linguistic factors on the utmost position in translation, the rendition will become rootless or the castle in the air. On the contrary, if the cultural factors considered first, then with careful diction of language use, a more faithful translation work will be created, and thus in turn this piece of work will finish functioning as the bridge of connecting two kinds of culture.

4. TRANSLATION FROM WEST TO EAST

If we have a brief view of the history of translation practice in China, we can get a holistic picture that many translation practitioners and scholars like to borrow the theories, documents, or literary works from abroad, especially from the western world. This can be summed up as follows: at Han, Sui, Tang, and Song Dynasties, we translated much Buddhist documents; at the Ming and Qing Dynasties, scientific documents and materials were favored by the translators; at the end of Qing Dynasty, western studies was the focus of translation; and western literary translation was carried during May Fourth movement and after. After the foundation of the new China, especially China's reform in the 1980s, the translation practices has been greatly enriched and many kinds of academic thoughts and cultural trends have been borrowed from the world, not limited to the western world. The above description gives us the impression that

translation in China first practiced as traveling from the west to east, and then the situation is a little changed. This is indicated by the words of Ji Xianlin, a famous scholar in China. He (2007) pointed out that: If we compare the Chinese culture as a river with a long history, sometimes the river has plenty of water, and sometimes it has less, but never dried up. The reason is that there is always new water constantly flooding into the river. Two large currents are worth mentioning, one is from India, and the other is from the western world.

Ji's words clearly indicates the importance of translation in reforming and maintaining Chinese culture, but it also shows that the translation practice in the old days was just a unbalanced movement, emphasizing the western knowledge and ignoring the Chinese culture. Thus many contemporary writers in China confess that they are more influenced by western trends and thoughts rather the ancient ancestors. Lu Xun once pointed out that his writing career was founded on about 100 western novels and little knowledge of medicine. Though these words were later criticized by the conservatives, this clearly shows the much influence of western thoughts on Chinese contemporary writers.

The first overall westernization in China occurs at the May Fourth movement period, when many insightful scholars began translate more literary works from the western world. But the function of this movement in history is controversial. If we say the May Fourth movement has the bad effect on the formation of Chinese discourse, it is not due to the too much literary works scholars has translated from the western world, but the little attention that they has paid to introduce China's own culture to the world. This unbalanced translation practice finally led to the formation of a particular Chinese critical discourse, and otherwise the discourse will be quite different from today's in China. This biased translation was manifested by Mr. De and Mr. Sai, which were the most welcome factors during this period. Compared with the advanced science and new thoughts, the poor and undeveloped China was thirsty to get more water from the world. The second overall westernization launched when China began to practice its reform and open policy at the end of 1970s. After 10 years of Cultural Revolution, the China's land has become nearly barren for culture. So as soon as the door is opened to the world again, all the literary potentials as well as the huge enthusiasm for the western culture spurted out (Zhao, 2003, pp.1-24).

Since we have two large scale of overall westernization, but a careful look at the two trends will find that they are quite different. Today's China is not the same as 90 years ago. This provokes an interesting question: what will be the future trends of this westernization in the globalization era? Shall we say surly that there will be a third, or even a fourth westernization in China, or there will be easternization in the world in the near future? It is still quite early to give a definite answer to the above

questions, but the fact that the movement of theory does not move in a unidirectional way does find its example in the history of cultural construction. Wang Ning (2004, p.91) once pointed out that the spread of theory is not always from the center to the periphery; it is sometimes spreads from the periphery to the center and functions both at the center as well as at the periphery and a fine example of this phenomenon is the spreading of Bahktin's theory. Bahktin was spread from Russian to west and back to Russian again and thus finished the theory spreading. Bahktin's writings cover "linguistics, psychoanalysis, theology, social theory, historical poetics, axiology, and philosophy of the person". (Clark & Holquist, 1983, p.VII) The most important thing is that the translation of Bahktin was culminated in China with the publication of *Bahktin Quanji* by Hebei Education Presss in 1998. This example shows that though China is a relatively periphery place compared with the west in critical theory discourse, it also can function as the center does. This example also counter back the attack that Chinese modern literature is a "colonized literature" and Chinese critical discourse is just colonized and deconstructed. Wang further argues that, "since China is a large country with a 5000-year-long history and splendid cultural heritage and rich literary tradition, it has never been totally 'colonized' before, nor will it be colonized in the future even if we introduce as many western theoretical works as possible through translation". (Wang, 2004, p.89)

Though it is not reasonable to be afraid of the flooded western translation, it is our duty for the Chinese scholars to introduce our own culture to the international world to practice a true equal dialogue with the international colleague. For one reason, China has become a large country both economically and culturally. The outside world needs understand this new China; for another reason, China's culture is an indispensable part of the world literature and culture. The emerging of the Chinese culture in the international stage will be a great advance for all the human achievements in social sciences. Just as the former Chairman Mao once pointed out, "it is not polite to receiving and not giving". So an equal exchange will give rise to an equal dialogue with the international world.

5. TRANSLATION TURN: FROM EAST TO WEST

The previous section discussed the westernization of translation practice in China. In this section we will focus on the other side of translation studies in China, that is translation from east to west. Though in ancient China, we have successful exchanges with the outside world. But since the middle of the 19th century, China was legged behind in the world. This backwardness once stimulates many insightful scholars and theorists to look at the outside world and try to borrow something new to

save the country. During this borrowing or “gibberish”, many scholars, on the other hand, have made much effort to introduce China’s tradition and culture to the outside world, and thus formed the phenomenon of the culture of China traveling to the West (Dong Xue Xi Jian). The first one in China to practice this movement is called Cheng Jitong. He translated the Chinese novel *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* into French with the name *Les Contes Chinois*, and this French version was translated into English by James Millington one year later, which turned out to be a best seller. Cheng later pointed out that,

What we are encouraged now, first and most, is not limit ourselves in one country’s literature, and thus become satisfied, but, on the contrary, to involve ourselves in and promote the world literature, by means of getting rid of the barrier of misunderstanding. And a large scale of translation can be a solution to this problem. Thus, this requires that we have to translate more works from the outside, and also translate our own literary works into the world. (Huang, 2000, p.362)

Another important figure worth mentioning is Gu Hongming (1857-1928), who was first educated in Britain and then came back to China to study the Chinese literature. Because of his much contribution in translating the China to the west, Lin Yu-tang once described him as “Galvanizer of the eastern and western thoughts”. Apparently speaking, Lin Yu-tang was also a great scholar in bridging the gap between the two kinds of culture. And his famous motto, “with two feet rooted in the eastern and western cultures, and one heart concentrated in the world articles” clearly shows his thoughts and pursuit.

6. TRANSLATION PRACTICE IN CHINA TODAY

After the foundation of People’s Republic of China, especially after the Cultural Revolution, great changes have taken place in the Mainland. Translation studies, has come to the rapid track. Luo and Lei (2004) summarized the characteristics of translation studies in today’s China. First and foremost, translation studies is closely related with translation activities; secondly, translation studies has paid more attention to the macroscopic study of translation theories; thirdly, translation studies has formed an independent system and has become an indispensable part of Chinese literary criticism; fourthly, translators in China begin to study translation from different perspectives, like social semiotic, comparative literature, etc..

The above discussion only limits itself in the translation studies circle. Considered this question in a global perspective, new characteristics will naturally emerge. As we mentioned before, nowadays we are living a global village in which different people with different cultural background communicate with one another. Translation has helped a lot during this international and interpersonal communication. Just owing to the function of translation, China has formed its own critical discourse. Obviously speaking, from the translation of

Buddhist documents in the Han Dynasty to the literature translation during and after the May Fourth movement, it seems that China has borrowed much but given little on the international cultural market. That is the reason why some conservatives in China criticized Chinese critical discourse as a “colonized critical discourse”. In the current age of globalization, this “colonizing” trend appears even more conspicuous with more and more people begin to learn English. In such a post-industrial world, information means power and strength. Almost all the information available on the Internet is documented in English. Furthermore, in order to have research papers recognized by the international academic world, scientists and scholars have to write in English and try to be published in the famous international journals. On the other side of the question, we noticed that this language colonization is not a unidirectional phenomenon, since translation concerns at least two kinds of culture. During the acceptance of the foreign cultures and thoughts, we have rewritten our own critical discourse, that is to say, a new form of meaning has been generated from this translation. On the other hand, we should actively accept this challenge, with more attention paid to the translation from east to the west. By doing like this, the China’ culture and thoughts will be equally exchanged in the international world. This will be another major function of translation in the globalization era in China today.

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