

Analysis of Lin Shu's Translation from the perspective of Polysystem Theory

Tingting Wang ^{1,*}, Feng Wen ²

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Huangshan University, Huangshan 245000, China;

² Changjun Banmahu High School, Changsha, China.

* Corresponding Author

Abstract

Different from the former linguistic theories which always strive for the "closest equivalence" and the theories which always place the original work in a sacred position, Even-Zohar sees the translated literature as a subsystem in the literary polysystem and examines the problems in translation from the cultural perspective, thus enables translation research to jump out of the barriers of "equivalence" and the original work and be placed in a much broader space. This paper tries to use polysystem theory to analyze the theme of Lin Shu's translation and the translation method he takes. After analyzing Hanan's argument, we point out the significance and defects of polysystem theory.

Keywords

Polysystem theory, Lin Shu's translation, cultural angle.

1. Introduction

Retrospecting the river of history, we may feel amazing that there should be so many insightful and thought-provoking translation theories. But after taking a closer look at them, you may find that lots of translational theorists are so clinging to achieve the closest equivalence between the source text and the target text, and hold the original text in a quite sacred position. Actually, like a leaf has two sides, there can not be two texts that are completely the same, especially when they have to be written in two different languages. This task grows tougher when the differences are larger. Once the culture difference is taken into consideration, this high mountain may seem to be insurmountable.

So, why do we have to stick to exploring on the road of "the closest equivalence"? Since translation is used as a bridge to communicate with others, if we can successfully achieve this goal, why do we still have to care about whether it is the best replicate of the original or not? Besides, those equivalence theories usually like to make static prescriptive rules, thus overlooking something that may be crucial to the effects the translational behavior is to achieve, such as the reader's reception. So, in the 1970s, the "culture turn" came into being. And Itama Even-Zohar's polysystem theory is quite representative among this turn. It "saw translated literature as a system operating in the larger social, literary and historical systems of the target culture" [1]. This move is quite meaningful because "translated literature had up to that point mostly been dismissed as a derivative, second-rate form" [1] and Zohar's viewpoint has greatly improved translated literature's position in the whole literary circle. Translation, as a cultural activity, is closely related with the vicissitudes of culture and history. So, compared with the linguistic aspects, examining translation from the cultural angle can broaden the field of translation research and dig out the hidden social, cultural, historical reasons of a translational phenomenon.

2. Polysystem Theory

Polysystem theory was initiated in the 1970s by the Israeli scholar Itama Even-Zohar, basing on the Russian Formalism and the Czech Structuralism. Shuttleworth and Cowie defined the new term Polysystem as “a heterogeneous, hierarchized conglomerate (or system) of systems which interact to bring about an on going, dynamic process of evolution within the polysystem as a whole [1].”

The larger macro-polysystem is made up by many polysystems such as the political, historical, religious literary polysystem, etc. These polysystems are closely related with each other. The change of one may lead to the mutation of others. And the translated literature is a subsystem within the literary polysystem. The way translated literature works as a system can be reflected in two aspects: which work the target language chooses to translate; how do other co-systems influence the translation norms, behavior and policies [1]. It may occupy either a central position or a peripheral position in the literary polysystem.

Zohar describes three cases in which the translated literature may hold the central position in the literary polysystem: 1) when a ‘young’ literature is being established and looks initially to ‘older’ literatures for ready-made models; 2) when a literature is ‘peripheral’ or ‘weak’ and imports those literary types which it is lacking; 3) when there is a critical turning point in literary history at which established models are no longer considered sufficient, or when there is a vacuum in the literature of the country [1].

Zohar maintains that the translation strategy is determined by the position translated literature holds in the literary polysystem. If it plays a central position, it will actively participate in shaping the center of polysystem. The translator will not feel constrained by the literary model of target language. They are more willing to break through the constraint of the conventions. The translated works are likely to be innovative and linking with the major events in the literary history. Normally the most important works are translated by main writers. Their translation tends to be more adequate. Through translation they import new poetics and techniques, which are usually the main factors leading to the establishment of new models in the target culture. But if it occupies a secondary position, then the translator are inclined to use the ready-made models in the target culture and the translated work will be relatively non-adequate. It will not exert important influence on the central system and even becomes a conservative element and stick to the conventional forms and norms of the target language.

3. The Historical Background of Lin’s Translation Activity

In order to have a full analysis of Lin’s translation, we can not sidestep a brief overview of the historical background then. After The Opium War, Chinese intellectuals started to learn from the west. At first, they thought China was defeated by the westerners’ strong armaments. So, Lin Zexu, widely recognized as the first person to learn from the west countries, called on to “师夷长技以制夷”. But later, as the domestic situation grew worse, especially the great attack of the Sino-Japanese War, seeing the corruption of the Qing Dynasty, they gradually realized that the western countries are so powerful not only because of their high technology, military forces and prosperous economy, but also because of their advanced political, educational and cultural systems. In 1898, Liang Qichao published his 《译印政治小说序》 which spoke highly of the positive influence a novel may have on changing people’s mind and the society, calling upon people to translate political novels [2]. In the next year, Lin Shu published his 《巴黎茶花女遗事》, which enjoyed a warm reception. Yan Fu even said that “可怜一卷《茶花女》，断尽支那荡子肠 [3].” Ever since then, literary translation began to prosper. The principle “中学为体，西学为用” was also reflected in the literary translation circle. On the one hand, they were eager to borrow the new thoughts from the western novels; on the other hand, they resisted to

abandon the classical Chinese language and culture. Wang Dongfeng in his essay has also said that: “长期以来，中国的帝王和臣民们，当然也包括知识分子，无不认为自己的国家是世界上最强大的，是理所当然的世界文化中心……中央大国、文化霸主的意识在当时的君臣民的思想中已经根深蒂固 [4].

4. Analysis of Lin's Translation from the Perspective of polysystem

If we look from the static prescriptive point of view, Lin Shu's translation can never be claimed faithful. Many critics have criticized Lin for his changing the source texts at liberty. Qian Zhongshu, however, reviewed it from the perspective of culture and gave a positive evaluation of Lin Shu's translation, because it has actually seduced the Chinese scholars to go for the English literature and learn from them: “我自己就是读了林译而增加学习外国语文的兴趣的……接触了林译，我才知道西洋小说会那么迷人 [5]”. This move is of great significance to broaden people's eye.

4.1. Theme

Some people criticized that among Lin Shu's translated works, only one third are written by the first class writers [6]. It is somewhat a waste of time for him to spend so much time in doing not that valuable work. This phenomenon may seem a little confusing: why did not Lin Shu choose more well-known pieces of work to translate? A scrupulous check between the source texts and the target texts will certainly not be helpful.

However, according to Zohar, the way translated literature works as a system can be reflected in which work the target language chooses to translate. As we have mentioned, the entire macro-polysystem is an intricate net in which every sub-polysystem will exert its influence on others. So if we want to explain explicitly why Lin Shu chose those works to translate, we must take the social polysystem into consideration.

Lin Shu, an old intellect living in a turbulent society, facing the decay of his country, had no better way than translation to save his country out of such danger. He often expressed his patriotic thought in the prologue and postscript of his translated works. He wanted to use novels to awake the people: “吾谓欲开民智……终之唯有译书”，“外国作家多以小说启发民智” [3]. So his primary aim was to indulge in people that kind of thought, making people realize that this was a crucial juncture in Chinese history rather than importing the first class literature of the western world. For example, in 1901, when the Eight-Power Allied Forces invaded China and tortured Chinese people, Lin Shu, inspired by his patriotic thought, began to translate the political novel Uncle Tom's Cabin with his collaborator Wei Yi. He said in the prologue and postscript of the book that: “希望国人通过黑奴的悲惨遭遇，‘引为殷鉴’。”“余与魏君同译是书，非巧于叙悲，以博阅者无端之眼泪；特为奴之势逼及吾种，不能不为大众一号……今当变政之始，而吾书适成，人人既蠲弃故纸，勤求新学，则吾书虽俚浅，亦足为振作志气、爱国保种之一助[3].” Maybe after reviewing these literature, we can perfectly understand the driven force behind Lin Shu's choice.

4.2. Method

According to Zohar, if translated literature occupies a central position, translators will tend to adopt foreignization as the primary strategy. If it just holds a peripheral position, translators are likely to be fond of a domestic one, obeying the main norms that already exist in the target culture. In order to analyze Lin Shu's translation strategy, we must first make clear which position translated literature holds in the Chinese literary polysystem. In most cases, translated literature only plays peripheral role, but in three cases it is in the central position of the literary polysystem, namely, when a literature is young, peripheral or weak or there is a crisis or vacuum in literary history.

As we have discussed in part three, at that time, China was still in the feudal society, people all thought that China was the strongest in the world. Although defeated in the Opium War, this belief had not been shaken. In politics, it is reflected by the principle “中学为体，西学为用”. In the literary circle, the situation is much similar. In about 1932, 陈衍 once said to Qian Zhongshu: “文学又何必向外国去学呢！咱们中国的文学不就好了么！ [5].” From this we can see that even in the 1930s, Chinese intellectuals still possess this kind of cultural and literary pride. Chinese traditional literature is neither young nor weak. This conviction is deeply rooted in Chinese intellectuals' mind. As to the literary crisis, it didn't break out until the 1920s and 1930s when the New Culture Movement calling for new literature. So, it is obvious that translated literature only took a peripheral position in the literary polysystem. No wonder Yan Fu and Lin Shu, the two most excellent translators at that time both took domestication as the primary translation method. Wang Dongfeng has ever made the similar conclusion in his essay: “当时的翻译文学实际上只能在多元系统内处于次要地位，难登大雅之堂。严复清楚地意识到了封建士大夫的这一审美心理。为了劝导他们接受西方先进的科学和人文思想，他不遗余力地用高度归化的语言进行翻译。 [4].” It can be deduced that out of the same reason Lin Shu mainly use domestication as the major strategy.

Lin Shu's translation is highly domesticated. This is a generally hold opinion in Chinese translation circle. When teachers talks about Venuti's concept of domestication and foreignization, Lin Shu is a popular example of domestication. However, an American scholar Patrick Hanan who is dedicated in studying late Qing fiction said: “In terms of their translating practice, Lin and Wei may be described as preservationist, as emphasizing ‘adequacy’ to a considerable degree [7].” This judgment may seem surprising but reasonable if compared with the translated novels published in 申报 in the late 19th century. The same with Qian Zhongshu, Hanan also pointed out Lin Shu's frequent use of transliteration when translating the names of people and places, no matter how insignificant they are. Even though he has to add explanatory notes, Lin Shu still transliterated the jests in the novels. What's more, Hanan also looked Lin's Ivanhoe from the perspective of narratology, and stated that the translated novel's chapters, the order of conveying information, the angle from which the narrator describes the scene all match that of the original novel. The historical comments and internal comments are also translated, which can actually be freely deleted.

5. Defects of Polysystem

From Hanan's argument we can conclude that Lin Shu is a practitioner of both domestication and foreignization. In the ways of narration, he is inclined to adopt the foreignization method, while in the language (except for different names and culture-loan words), he is more prefer to domestication. This result seems a little conflict with Zohar's theory when translated literature is in the peripheral position, which may indicate the defect of Polysystem.

China experienced a transitional period in the late Qing era. From the translated novels published in 申报 to Lin Shu's translation, we can already see the improvement. Lin's work is far more foreignized than their former ones. But this process is a gradual and hierarchical one. It is until the New Cultural Movement that translated language started to abandon the so called classical Chinese. So we can reasonably think that Zohar's theory did not take this kind of transitional period into consideration. The system of translated literature is not always in an either A or B situation. It can also be subdivided into many aspects, such as language and narration method as we have discussed above. Every aspect may occupy a different position within the system. So, that's the reason why when translated literary as a whole takes a peripheral role in the literary polysystem, while Lin Shu adopts both domestication and foreignization to translate.

Besides this and Gentzler's generalization of the defects of polysystem in his book *Contemporary Translation Theories*, some scholars (Wang Dongfeng etc.) also argue that Zohar's theory is in the danger of neglecting the translator's subjectivity. However, as the translator's decision is mainly decided by the social-cultural background, so we can say that his degree of subjectivity is quite low.

6. Conclusion

No theory has the explanatory power to cover all the phenomena. Polysystem theory jumps out of the static perspective and shows us a dynamic movement between translation, culture, history, society etc. In the broad historical background, we can see other polysystem's influence on translation and the translator. We can give the translators in history a fair evaluation. What's more, as China is trying its best to carry out the "going out" project to promote Chinese literature abroad, maybe we can assimilate some useful ideas from Lin Shu's successful example.

Acknowledgements

This work was financially supported by Anhui Province Higher Education Humanities and Social Sciences General Project (SKHS2018B10) fund and Anhui Province Higher Education Teaching Research General Project (2018jyxm1255) fund.

References

- [1] Munday, Jeremy: *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications* (Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, China 2010), p.108-110.
- [2] Tianzhen Xie: *Translation Studies (Translatology)*(Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, China 1999), p. 284.
- [3] Fukang Chen: *A History of Translation Theory in China* (Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, China 2000), p.121-123.
- [4] Dongfeng Wang: Cultural Position of Translated Literature and Translator's Cultural Attitude, *Chinese Translator's Journal*, 2000(04), p.5.
- [5] Zhongshu Qian: *Patchwork: Seven Essays on Art and Literature* (SDX Joint Publishing Company, China 2002), p.80, 102.
- [6] Xinzhang Luo: *An Anthology of Essays on Translation* (The Commercial Press, China 1984), p.187.
- [7] Patrick Hanan: *A Study in Acculturation- The First Novels Translated into China*, *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*,2001(23), p.78.