

# An Analysis of Lin Shu's Translation Activity from the Cultural Perspective

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**Abstract**—Lin Shu is one of the most influential translators in Chinese history. Although he had no knowledge of any foreign languages, he translated more than 180 foreign literary works in collaborating with other people. His translation, which enjoyed great popularity at that time, is an unusual phenomenon in China and even in the world history of translation. While, translation can not be done in vacuum and a translator is inevitably influenced by his own culture consciously or unconsciously. Using the theories of Poly-system and “three elements (poetics, ideology and patronage)”, this article tries to probe into the various factors influencing Lin Shu's translation.

**Index Terms**—Lin Shu, translation activity, cultural perspective

## I. INTRODUCTION

Lin Shu (1852-1924), one of the most influential translators in Chinese history, translated more than 180 foreign literary works, including 160 novels, which were taken from 98 writers' works from 11 countries. The subject matters of his translation of novels are wide and rich. Being illiterate of foreign languages, he translated with classical Chinese upon his collaborator's oral interpretation of the original texts by employing the techniques of omission, addition, and alteration freely. As the master of translation, Lin Shu not only ushered in the Western literature and culture to China, but also introduced many new literary techniques to the Chinese writers and readers.

Lin Shu's translations did make a big hit at his times, enjoying great popularity among a large number of Chinese readers and still maintains some readable flavors now. His translation is an unusual phenomenon in China's and even the world's history of translation. This article tries to re-evaluate Lin Shu's translation by analyzing the relevant conditioning factors and give his translation a more reasonable explanation from the cultural respect.

## II. LIN SHU AND HIS TRANSLATION ACTIVITIES

The year of 1924 witnessed Lin Shu's departure from this world. He had been dedicated to translation for several decades, broadening the horizons of the fellow countrymen and promoting the Sino-Western cultural exchanges.

It seems that the things happening to Lin Shu footnote the old saying that fantastic translations would inevitably pass into oblivion—nowadays, few speak of Lin Shu and his translation; even if sometimes mentioned, he would be the target of criticism for his unfaithfulness in translation. The significance of studying him lies in the attempt to find out why his translated works at one time enjoyed overwhelming popularity and what lessons we can draw from his translation to develop our translation theoretical research and to direct our translation practice.

### A. *Lin Shu—from Juren to a Translator*

Lin Shu was born in Min County (present Fuzhou City) of Fujian Province. In 1882, He was granted the title of Juren (the title given to the scholars successful in passing the imperial exam at the provincial level in ancient China).

As a child, Lin Shu lived in straitened circumstances after his father's repeated failures in business. Later, his father's death left his family in poverty. Under the guidance of his mother and grandmother, Lin Shu learned a lot of good virtues, and he was filially dedicated to his mother, which was much praised at that time.

Poor as his family was, Lin Shu was a diligent boy. At the age of five, he developed the desire for learning. When he was eleven years old, he began to learn ancient Chinese prose, and from then on, he had been trying to find as many books to read as he could. It is said that he had covered no fewer than 2000 ancient books by the age of 20, which made it possible for him to become a great master of classical Chinese and a famous translator.

When young, Lin Shu began to be concerned about the world situation, believing that China must learn from Western nations if she wanted to become richer and stronger. It was in his forties that he switched his efforts to the translation of Western books in order to enlighten the Chinese people and awaken his compatriots to China's weakness for the purpose of encouraging them to strive for the motherland's prosperity and powerfulness.

In his last years, he was against the New Cultural Movement and the movement of vernacular, and became

increasingly conservative. He once wrote a public letter to Cai Yuanpei to denounce the New Cultural Movement. But after realizing his inappropriate manner, he wrote to publishing houses to make apologies.

In 1924, he died in Peking as an advocator of feudal ethical code and classical Chinese, leaving invaluable literary heritage as well as controversial fame. To be just, Lin Shu's political standpoint might deserve criticism but his literary talents and contributions should not and would never be denounced.

### B. *Lin Shu's Translation Activities*

Politically, Lin Shu was a conservative, but he was a pioneering scholar in literary translation. Merely by chance he started his career of literary translation. In 1898, one of his close friends named Wang Shouchang freshly from France talked about the French masterpiece *La Dame aux Camelias* to Lin Shu and Lin became interested. So, Wang Shouchang interpreted the book for Lin Shu, and Lin Shu reorganized and wrote down the contents with classical Chinese. Very soon, Lin Shu's first translated fiction entitled *Chahuanü Yishi* in collaboration with Wang Shouchang came out, which completely out of their expectations, made a big hit. From then on, Lin Shu switched his attention to the translation of Western books until his death in 1924. In the following 25 years, Lin Shu translated 181 books, amounting to 270 volumes. The nationalities of the original authors cover Britain, America, France, Russia, Greek, Norway, Spain, etc., and the authors range from Shakespeare to Tolstoy.

Lin Shu was a talented scholar with high speed in translation. It is said that hardly had the interpreter finished the oral interpretation when he finished his translation. Consequently, he was able to translate six thousand words within four hours. Speaking of Lin's translation speed, Hu Shi, who was a renowned scholar at that time, showed great admiration. Accomplished scholars of Lin's times such as Guo Moruo, Mao Dun, Zheng Zhenduo, etc. were all greatly influenced by his translated novels. Zheng Zhenduo once said: "We cannot find equivalents for every word or phrase in the translation for the original version, but after reading through the whole paragraph and the corresponding translation, you would find that the original flavor was retained. Even the sense of humor, which was considered difficult to render, was expressed in Lin's version" (Xue, 1983, p.162). Guo Moruo remembered: "Lin Shu's translated novels enjoyed great popularity and they were also my favorites... His translation of Joan Haste was the first Western book I read. This book was not thought highly of in the world, but much color was added to it through Lin Shu's translation in concise classical Chinese" (Chen, 1992, p.133).

Although he mainly employed the strategy of free translation, Lin Shu never domesticated the proper names of places and persons, or even the names of the authors. This seems very natural today but was very rare at that time. Before him, translators always changed the proper names and amended the originals, sometimes even omitted the names of the original authors. It was Lin Shu that took the lead in the standard translation of literature of China.

As an accomplished translator, Lin Shu had no knowledge of foreign languages. All his translations were in collaboration with his partners. As he had quite a few partners, he had the opportunity to translate various works in different languages; on the other hand, owing to the ignorance of some of his partners, he spent much of his energy on quite a few less valuable works.

One month after Lin Shu's death, Zheng Zhenduo published an article entitled *Mr. Lin Qinnan* in *Novel Monthly*, which commented Lin Shu in an all-round way. The comments were comparatively just. As far as Lin Shu's translation, he wrote:

*On the one hand, we should be grateful to Mr. Lin Qinnan because he introduced so many worldwide masterpieces to us; on the other hand, it is a pity that nearly half of his energy was in vain, because only over 60 of his more than 150 translated books were masterpieces (including 27 second-rate books by Henry Rider Haggard and Arthur Conan Doyle) (Xue, 1983, p.159).*

Comments on Lin Shu involve a number of controversies. Many people criticize him because he was a stubborn conservative from the political standpoint of ordinary men; however he can never be forgotten or negated because of his peerless contribution to the history of Chinese literary translation.

## III. THE CULTURAL TURN IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

The 1970s witnessed the "cultural turn" in translation studies of the Western translation field. Hence, the target-language-culture-oriented translation theory came into being. The representatives of this "cultural school" are Even-Zohar and Lefevere, whose typical translation theories are respectively "Poly-system" theory and "three elements" theory. These theories provide the translation researchers with a new theoretical framework and perspective.

In his research of Hebrew literature, Even-Zohar, an Israeli scholar, put forward "Poly-system theory". This theory considers literature as a Poly-system made up of multiple systems, whose positions are different, some occupying the central position, others the marginal positions. During the course of the development of this Poly-system, the positions of the components vary with cultural contexts. When translated literature occupies the central position, national literary system is relatively weak, or in peril, or at the turning point, or even in the vacuum period. Thus, literature system would introduce new thoughts, contents, and theories by means of translation. And the translation methods are embodied in various forms. On the contrary, when literature system occupies the central position, there is no need to introduce foreign elements, and translation is, therefore, in the marginal position. The translation strategies would also be affected. Zohar harbors the view that it is the mainstream literature that determines the status of the translated

literature in the poly-system. The status of the translated literature in the poly-system, in turn, would determine the material to be translated and the translation strategies to be employed—domestication or foreignization, literal translation or free translation (Even-Zohar, 2000). Poly-system theory is of significance partially because it tells that it is the multiple systems of the target language culture that determine the translation activities. What will be translated and how the selected materials will be translated are determined by the need of the target language culture and the standards of the target language (Gentzler, 1993).

Andre Lefevere is another influential representative of the cultural school of translation. In his book entitled *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, he elaborates on the famous “three elements” theories. His theory considers translation the rewriting of the original. The translated version can not fully reflect the flavor of the original mainly because the translation activities are manipulated by three factors including poetics, ideology and patronage. The images of the translated works and the viewpoints of the translator are all closely related to the mainstream poetics and ideology of the current society. Furthermore, patronages including political parties, classes, the royal palace, religious institutions, publishing houses, and mass media, etc. are always manipulating the whole process of translation activities (Lefevere, 1992).

Other scholars respond actively to this cultural view on translation, and the trend of conducting translation studies from the perspective of cultural communication has been gaining weight.

American translation theorist Maria Tymoczko has once noted that as a language art, translation has often been considered from the viewpoint of timeless linguistic rules (which has led to normative tendency) (Lin, 2001). But such a view has changed since the 1950s. Translation is no longer viewed as a mere transformation of linguistic signs from one language into another. It is more of a cultural phenomenon. “Some translation theorists like Lambert and Robyn, view translation as identical to cultural communication, which is conceived not as a static phenomenon but instead as the endless translation of signs into other signs” (Gentzler, 1993, p.186). And Susan Bassnett and Lefevere (2001) approved her proposal as “momentous”, marking a “cultural turn” for translation study.

*Once upon a time, the questions that were always being asked were “How can translation be taught?” and “How can translation be studied?” ... Now, the questions have changed. The object of study has been redefined; what is studied is the text embedded in its network of both source and target cultural signs and in this way translation study has been able both to utilize the linguistic approach and to move out beyond it (Bassnett & Lefevere, 2001, p.123).*

According to A Dictionary of Translation Studies the main viewpoints of the cultural view on translation are as follows (Fang, 2004):

Translation is more of a cross-cultural communication than of a bilingual communication; the aim of translation is to break the language barriers to cultural communication; the nature of translation is cross-cultural transmission of information and translation is a cultural activity in which translators make the reappearance of the source text with the target language; the essence of translation is cultural transplanting and cultural mixture, but it takes time; it is rather than the language but cultural information that is the object of translation activity. The involvement of cultural factors in translation process is permanent when we put translation studies under cultural background. Political tendency, sense of aesthetics, and ethics all have great influence on the process of translation. Translators’ amendments to the original, addition or omission, are all the results of cultural constraints of a certain period in a certain context. Since the aim of translation is to step up cultural communication, some amendments in the target text are acceptable and sometimes necessary, which will serve the target language culture better or smooth the cultural communication. Some contents that are irrelevant in today’s society or not fit for our country’s current situation should be omitted in temporary translation. But in the future, these omitted parts will probably be added when it is retranslated, for the broadening of the readers’ cultural horizons will equip them with necessary psychological capacity to understand and accept these contents. For example, foreignization and domestication are mainly concerned about cultural factors. Foreignization is in line with cultural transplanting, but domestication is the opposite process to cultural transplanting. As far as the form of the translation work is concerned, it is generally admitted that no translation work is the production of pure domestication or mere foreignization. No matter what attitude the translator adopts towards foreignization and domestication, his translation work must be a mixture of domestication and foreignization. No matter how much the target text is domesticated, it should at least reflect the customs and conventions of the alien nationalities. Otherwise, translation can not be called translation any more.

#### IV. FACTORS INFLUENCING LIN SHU’S TRANSLATION ACTIVITIES

For a long time, the “source-text oriented” translation research mode has been prevailing in Chinese translation studies circles, in which translation is only considered as the reproduction of the source text, and “faithfulness” being the only criterion for evaluating a translated version. Translation studies made in this mode consequently turn to be a simple summing-up of the translator’s translation thoughts and practice, while ignoring the fact that the social-cultural environment exerts great influence on the translator’s translation theory and activities.

In light of the Poly-system theory of Even-Zohar and Manipulation theory of Andre Lefevere, the following intends to analyze Lin Shu, the most unique and influential translator in the late Qing dynasty in a comprehensive way integrated with the China’s special social background at that time. Specifically speaking, an investigation will be made on the ways social cultural environment exerted significant impact on Lin Shu’s choices of the original texts and

methods of translation, as well as into the counteraction between Lin Shu's translation and the contemporary society.

#### A. *The Influence of Historical and Cultural Contexts on His Purpose of Translation*

According to Poly-system theory, the translator's intention of translation is first of all determined by the social and cultural background of the society in which the translator lives. In Lin Shu's times, China's feudal society was on the decline. China's economy and politics were all disadvantageous as compared with those of the Western countries. In addition, China's culture was undergoing severe test. Yet, traditional literature was still the mainstream, and its norms still governed the readers. The most influential and popular language among scholars was the ancient language of the Tongcheng School. But as far as the form, thoughts, and contents were concerned, there was hardly any breakthrough. In fact, China's national literature was in the stationary period or in peril. Therefore, some scholars made efforts to break the foundation of traditional literature and establish a new literature system. Liang Qichao advocated "Poetry Revolution", "Literary Revolution" and "Novel Revolution". Of all the three "revolutions", the achievements of "Novel Revolution" were the most invisibly tremendous. On the one hand, Liang Qichao, in his *On the Relationship between Fiction and the Mass*, insisted on the establishment of the position of novels; on the other hand, he criticized the Chinese traditional novels, indicating that they were filled with too much of love affairs and theft and therefore became the roots of the social disorder. So, they should be eradicated.

Under this condition, it seemed that the leading scholars of the revolution wanted to make novels the core of literature; but traditional national novels failed to fulfill this historical mission. Thus, the so-called "Literary Vacuum" appeared. This "Literary Vacuum" made translation the "mainstream" activity. Scholars of that ages resorted to translation to establish a new literary system. It was in this social and cultural context that Lin Shu began his translation activities. Naturally, his aim of translation is to "awaken the Chinese nation to its weakness" and to "call on the fellow countrymen to strengthen military forces" (Xue, 1983, p.104).

#### B. *The Influence of Target Language Culture on His Choice of Books*

Target language culture exerts great influence on the choice of the books to be translated. From the very beginning, Lin Shu spontaneously connected his translation activities with the realities of the society. The political and social atmosphere directly influenced the choice of the originals. He translated many books which sang high praise for the fight against invasion and showed deep sympathy for the invaded weak nations. He wanted to vitalize the Chinese nation to combat against invasion with foreign people's high anti-invasive spirits. The translated version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* served this purpose very successfully.

Lin Shu and his collaborator Wei Yi rendered Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into Chinese in 1901. Lin translated this novel to let Chinese people know about the plight of African-Americans and their struggle for freedom, and to "bolster their morale to defend the Chinese race" (Xue, 1983, p.104). The Chinese version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* came out at a time when the Exclusion Act of California (1882) was in force and Chinese laborers in the United States were suffering torment similar to what Blacks had suffered. Readers from all walks of life in China were shocked and touched. In his review of the novel, Lin Shu pointed to the fact that, "The calamity has already befallen us yellow race. The exclusion of Chinese laborers in the U.S. and the maltreatment of Chinese in various countries in the West are already a fact. Their predicament is in no way different from, but worse than that of the Negroes" (Xue, 1983, p.103). He recommended the novel to all readers, saying that, "I weep for us yellow people as I weep for the Negroes; I grieve for the present poor situation of us yellow people in the same way I lament the past of the Negroes. I hope that every household can have a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*..." (Xue, 1983, p.103). According to this, we know that Lin Shu's choice of this book was also a purposeful conduct. The collective and his own political ideology induced him to introduce this book to the Chinese readers.

#### C. *The Influence of Literary Context on His Translation Strategy*

According to Poly-system theory, in translating, the translator with a strong cultural background tends to adopt domesticating strategy; otherwise, the translator would choose foreignizing strategy. Yet, Lin Shu's adoption of domestication is not in line with the hypothesis of Poly-system. The main reason should be that the Chinese scholars at that time still subjectively considered Chinese culture superior to foreign cultures and were proud of it, although Chinese culture was in a weak marginal position. For the sake of catering to the taste of the target readers, Lin Shu adopted domesticating strategy.

Not knowing any foreign languages, Lin Shu could not read novels in foreign languages. However, as a master of classical Chinese, he had a strong desire of literary creation. Besides, his unbending character and great ambition and conscience impelled him to achieve his aims through great efforts. He aimed to expand classical Chinese through enabling the readers to read his works and to enjoy the beauty of our classical Chinese. He believed he had the ability to translate modern novels by means of classical Chinese and thus enliven the old language form of Chinese. Therefore, he spared no effort to make his translation as beautiful as possible, which made his translation strategies of omission, addition and alteration reasonable.

And it is also out of the purpose of presenting graceful classical Chinese that Lin Shu changed the translation of the title of the novel for three times, from 《黑奴受逼记》 to 《汤姆家事》 and to the present 《黑奴吁天录》, which shows his strategy of rewriting.

#### D. *The Influence of Poetics on his Translation Strategy*

Poetics includes two aspects. One refers to literary technique, genre, theme, environment and symbolism; the other refers to the social role of literature. The former constitutes the functions of literature and the latter manipulates the degree of the influence of literary works (Lefevere, 1992, p.26). As a member of society, the translator would be unavoidably affected by the poetics of the target language culture. The influence is always embodied by the translation strategies like abridgment of and amendment to the original. Because the target readers are from the target language system, and the translator has long been steeped in the target language system, the mainstream literature would to a large extent exert influence on the process of creation of translated literature. Consequently, the translated version differs from the original in grammatical structure, logical forms, styles, etc. The translator always has the fear that his translation would be cold-shouldered if he introduced some strange expressions into his translation, so he would more often than not make some amendments to the original according to the poetics of the target language culture.

When translating *La Dame Aux Camelias*, Lin Shu changed the first person into the third person just because the story-telling mode of traditional Chinese literature is the third person and the first person is seldom used. The amendments to the original on the part of Lin Shu are also reflected in his translation of the personality, image, religion and psychological description of the characters.

#### E. *The Influence of His Ideology on His Translation Strategy and the Choice of Originals*

Ideology refers to social and political thoughts and values of the society, a certain class or of individual. The influences of the translator's ideology could lead to the deformation of the original in translation.

*"What kind of image would the translated literary works create is to a great extent determined by the translator's ideology, which can be the translator's own or the one imposed upon the translator by patrons" (Lefevere, 1992, p.41).*

Therefore, under the influence of a different ideology, the things bearing the unique feature of the original culture may be weakened, deformed, or disappear. The Qing dynasty propagandized ruling by the virtue of filial piety, and the concept of filial piety was deeply rooted in the mind of Lin Shu. Therefore, he always imposed the label of filial piety on his translated works. Take the translation of the titles of some books for example:

Author	The Original Title	The Chinese Title	Literal Meaning of the Chinese Title
Charles Dickens	The Old Curiosity Shop	孝女耐儿传	A Story of Filial Daughter and Son
Henry Rider Haggard	Montezuma's Daughter	英孝子火山报仇记	The Filial Son's Revenge on His Father's Murderer
David Christie Murray	The Martyred Fool	双孝子喋血酬恩记	Two Filial Sons Taking Their Revenge

Obviously, Lin Shu rendered the original titles in this way to comply with the social values for the purpose of making his translations easily accepted by the target readers.

#### F. *The Influence of the Patronage on the Translator*

Patrons refer to any individual or institution which can help the literary works to come out and circulate and at the same time can hinder, ban the circulation of or destroy the literary works. They exert crucial influence on the trend of translation activities, the prosperity or decline of translation, and the status and life of the translator (Yang, 2001). Why did Lin Shu's translations filled with mistakes, abridgments, and omissions enjoy great popularity? Historically, part of the reason is the need of the social context of new literary forms; and what is more important is that his translation activities gained the strong support of the patrons. In his ages, many scholars with bourgeois thoughts like Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao were engaged in the translation of various literary works and political novels so as to promote bourgeois innovation. The translations of *La Dame aux Camelias* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were the response to this tendency, and they were of course supported by the reformers of the upper class. Kang Youwei's verse "Peerless are the two identical translators of Yan Fu and Lin Shu, hundreds of their translations served to invigorate the nation" (Xue, 1983, p.277) is the great support and compliments for him.

### V. CONCLUSION

As a very influential translator, Lin shu enjoys a special status in China's translation history for introducing an enormous number of foreign works into China and thus exerted tremendous influence on his contemporary scholars and the generations to follow. Lin Shu knew no foreign languages, but he translated more than 180 originals in Western languages into Chinese. It is the concrete social and cultural needs that made Lin Shu occupy a unique status in China's translation history. His translations abounding in mistakes, omissions, and abridgment were not sniffed at but greeted with tremendous enthusiasm, which was a great wonder in the history of world translation. In his translation activity, translation was not merely the transformation of linguistic signs but also the cultural interaction concerning the target language poetics, ideologies, and patronages, etc. Therefore, the criticism of the unfaithfulness of his translations from the perspective of linguistics was not comprehensive, scientific or objective. Only when taking into account the social and cultural background of his times can we conduct the studies of his translation activities in a relatively scientific and objective manner.

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