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BRIDGING THE POLITICAL AND THE PERSONAL

LITERARY TRANSLATION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Problem and Objectives

Over the last several decades, translation has become a more prolific, noteworthy and respectable activity than ever before. From diplomatic talks to business negotiations, from court interpreting to news editing, from literary criticism of classic works to movie productions of recent best-sellers, translation is taking up a central role in this world full of texts and mediated information. After all, it is undeniable that nowadays translation is a common experience and an increasingly important factor in global communication. It makes it possible for speakers of different languages to communicate with each other and brings together cultures which might once have been clearly apart. Alongside the boom in translation itself, Translation Studies have also started to achieve institutional authority in the academic system. From James Holmes's classic essay 'The Name and Nature of Translation Studies' (1972) which announces the emergence of a young discipline, to the development of Descriptive Translation Studies which establishes an empirical scientific method of translation research, and to the more recent 'Cultural Turn' and 'Power Turn' which brings a critical edge to the empirical investigation of translation, Translation Studies in the West has already grown into a dynamic and independent discipline with its own objectives and methods.

In China, Translation Studies is an even younger discipline which was established under heavy influence from western theories. As Chang Nam Fung (2008) observes, traditional Chinese discourses on translation have been impressionistic, unsystematic and evaluative, and the field of translation research used to be a neglected field at the periphery of the humanities. This peripheral position of translation research did not change until the Western repertoire of translation theories was imported massively into China since the 1980s. Eugene Nida (1964) and Peter Newmark (1981), for example, are two notable scholars who

have helped to establish the linguistic-oriented translation research canon in China (Chan, 2004: 46). The Cultural Turn championed by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere has provided noticeable impetus for the development of cultural-oriented research in China in the last two decades. Many Chinese researchers have endeavoured to study translation not merely as a linguistic phenomenon, but rather as a complex practice of cultural transfer (Xie Tianzhen, 1999; Guo Jianzhong, 2000). More recently with the rise of the 'power turn' in western Translation Studies (Tymoczko and Gentzler, 2002), there appeared to be a widespread and sometimes faddish use of terms such as 'power', 'ideology' and 'politics' in Translation Studies in China (Tang Jun, 2004; Wang Xianming, 2005; He Xianbing, 2005).

The introduction of western theories, on the positive side, helped to enliven the Chinese thinking and broaden the scope of traditional translation research in China. On the negative side, however, Translation Studies in China followed too closely the Western theories, and it became less reflective of its own position, as well as the challenges and opportunities arising from its location. An uncritical acceptance and application of foreign theories on local translation phenomena may result in inappropriate orientations, twisted explanations, and even misleading conclusions.

One problem that concerns the current book is the recent emphasis on the political role of translation in Chinese translation research. While many western scholars also argue that translation is essentially a political act (e.g. Venuti, 1995; Tymoczko, 2000; Baker, 2006; Schäffner, 2007), the same research orientation may not be the most appropriate in the Chinese context. In the West, translation has often been assumed to be a professional practice, characterized by neutral information transfer. This overly naive assumption ignores the manipulative intervention of the translator, and the complex power relations behind every act of translation. Under such circumstances, it is critical and urgent for translation researchers to challenge the orthodox professional expectations so as to reveal the political nature of translation practice. Just as Christina Schäffner argues, an exploration of the manifold relationship between translation and politics will 'make significant contribution to an emerging critical translation studies' (2007: 147). For many western scholars,

calling for the politicisation of translation may provide pathways for the disciplinary development of Translation Studies; this argument, nevertheless, can be potentially dangerous if not properly reflected upon and adapted in another context. In China, for example, the association between translation and politics has always appeared very blatant. From the translation of Buddhist scriptures which was largely dependent on the royal patronage of its time, to the novel translation boom at the turn of the twentieth century that aimed at enlightening the people and the salvation of the nation, and further to the translation of Soviet works under the communist regime, translation projects in China have long been recognized as a political and politicised deployment. In fact, under most situations, Chinese translators are politically engaged, not because they want to be, but rather because they have no other option. One must be aware that talking about political engagement in an authoritarian or totalitarian regime carries different, or even completely opposite implications from having such a discussion in a modern democratic society. When borrowing from the 'power turn' and transporting its propositions – such as 'translation as political practice' (Spivak, 1992), 'translation as ideological manipulation' (Lefevere, 1992), 'translation as act of political and social engagement' (Tymoczko, 2000; Baker, 2006), or 'translation as tools for political action' (Schäffner, 2007) – from the West to China, the researchers must be very careful about the different contexts involved, the different ways of using the same terminologies, as well as the different social implications and consequences of the same proposition.

What we have noted here, nevertheless, does not imply that Chinese researchers should stop learning from the West. Uncritical rejection, after all, is just as dangerous as uncritical acceptance of foreign theories. What matters most is not whether the research focus or orientation is based on indigenous or imported theories. Rather, it is whether the research focus is selected according to a critical reflection on the contextual information, whether the research project conducts adequate and well-controlled enquiries, and whether the research findings are relevant and useful in answering the questions arising from the specific context.

The objective of this research is to provide a descriptive study of the selected facts and phenomena of contemporary Chinese literary translation, bringing together elements of explanations, critical deliberations and contextual judgements. Based on a brief reflection on the Chinese context and the researcher's own position, this research sets out to explore contemporary Chinese literary translation on both a political and a personal level. It draws attention to the imbrications between politics and translation, but also scrutinizes the individual or idiosyncratic aspect of literary translation. Encompassing the political and the individual dimensions of translation, this book seeks to explore the literary translation as a complex and creative process in which different factors and relationships work in different directions and create dynamic meanings and experiences about the final product of translation.

1.2 Basic Concepts

Before we move on, we would like to first of all focus on the understanding and use of the basic concepts involved in the current discussion. Many of these concepts are commonly used without much explication, as their general meanings seem quite self-evident. We believe, however, that it is necessary to explore these basic concepts here, as they stand for some fundamental beliefs about the various major aspects that are to be explored in this study.

Politics and the Political

Politics is one of the key concepts that must be considered at the outset. To explore translation as a political or politicised act, the researcher must first of all understand what politics is, and what it means to be or become political. Since the current research is concerned with contemporary Chinese translation practice, we mainly examine how politics and the political realm have been conceived in the Chinese context.