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<td><strong>Date</strong></td>
<td>2014</td>
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<td><strong>URL</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/42911">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/42911</a></td>
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<td><strong>Rights</strong></td>
<td>© 2014 The author. This is the author created version of a work that has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in Proceedings of the XXth FIT World Congress, Berlin 2014 (volume 2): Man vs. Machine? The Future of Translators, Interpreters and Terminologists, published by BDÜ Fachverlag on behalf of the author. It incorporates referee's comments but changes resulting from the publishing process, such as copyediting, structural formatting, may not be reflected in this document.</td>
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Translation in Communist China

——Using “the First National Conference of Translation” as an Example

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Abstract: China was in the firm grip of the communist ideology from the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on October 1, 1949 to the eve of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. With the communist ideology looming large in the background, literary translation during this period was greatly influenced by political factors such as China’s alliance with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union), its friendship with communist countries in Eastern European, its antagonism against the Western capitalist camp, and its literary policy stipulating that literature should shape and reflect the revolutionary spirit. How did the unique translation phenomenon in China occur? Why did the Communist Party of China (CPC) hurry to systematize translation activities and set a unified translation standard as soon as the PRC was founded? The paper seeks to answer these questions through analysing the 1951 First National Conference of Translation, an influential event in the modern history of translation in China in the 1950s and 1960s.

Key words: translation activities; ideology; national discourse; systematization

In October 1949, CPC established its communist regime in Mainland China. From 1949 to 1966, literary translation activities were heavily influenced and manipulated by the national discourse and at the same time, the systemazation of translation activites became the stepping stone on the path to the construction of national discourse. The 1951 First National Conference of Translation, during which specific measures of action were proposed and functions of literary translation in the “new regime” were determined, had a major impact upon translation industry in China in the 1950s and 1960s. In November 1949, the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) was established, and so was the Translation Bureau which was under the
administration and supervision of GAPP. From 5 to 12 November, 1951, the First National Conference of Translation, organized by the Translation Bureau, was held in Beijing and attended by 165 representatives and translators from compilation and translation institutions and major publishers across the country. Hu Qiaomu(1912-1992), then vice minister of the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee and concurrently Administrator of GAPP, was commissioned by Mao Zedong as Head of Translation Work Committee of CPC Central Committee. He delivered the keynote speech entitled “Set up Translation Plans and Improve Translation Quality”, in which he pointed out that “this conference has two aims: first is to plan for translation activity; second is to improve the quality of translation” (Hu 1994: 2). In view of these two aims, what specific instructions were given? How well were the instructions followed? What impact did it have over translation activities? What was the relationship between these two aims?

During the conference, Shen Zhiyuan(1902-1965), then Director of Translation Bureau, gave detailed instructions on translation work in his report of “Plan for Translation Activities and Strive for Better Quality of Translation”. He reported: Since its founding in 1949, the Translation Bureau of GAPP had already conducted a comprehensive survey of translators and translated books across the country, had started publishing catalogues for newly-published translated books on a monthly basis, and had launched Translation Bulletin, a professional journal releasing news on translation plans of different institutions and serving as a communication channel between institutions and translators. The Bureau’s effort laid a solid foundation for the upcoming systematization of translation activities. Nevertheless, the translation cause in New China had just started and had a long way to go before achieving its goals. It was inevitable that there were still “shortcomings” in the translation work (Shen 1951:10).

First of all, what did Shen Zhiyuan and Hu Qiaomu, authoritative mouthpieces of government, mean by “systemization”? Was “to improve the quality of translation” as simple as it sounded? Secondly, in view of Yan Fu’s canonical translation standard of “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” ¹, mistranslation could be largely avoided by improving translators’ foreign language proficiency. However, what we need to consider is what “shortcomings”, in the eyes of the authority, really refer to? Also, what problems can be resolved once the systematization of translation activities is achieved?

ideological insensitivity, slack attitude, and sloppy work”. The reason, according to Dong Siqiu, was that the translators did not closely follow the instruction of “serve the people and speed up the realization of socialism through translation work”. In his viewpoint, the selection of source text should “cater to the needs of the mass public”, otherwise, “the translated works could be easily contaminated by incorrect views or ‘toxins’ in the source text”; “The translator is irresponsible even if his translation has successfully attained the translation standard of ‘faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance’” (Dong 1950:13). Deficiency in translation skills, in Dong Siqiu’s view, does not even qualify as a major “shortcoming”. Even when appropriate translation techniques are used, the major shortcoming in translation is not overcome unless “toxins” in the source texts are eliminated. The article also makes it clear that the so-called “incorrect views and ‘toxins’” refers to those that either advocate capitalism or fail to keep up with the development pace of the socialist Soviet Union.

In fact, it is easy to see that Dong Siqiu’s thought was in line with the general guideline for the literary and art circles of China—“literature and art should serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers”—which was formulated during the First National Conference of the Representatives of Literary and Art Workers in 1949. Shortly after that, the translation society followed hard on the heels of the conference by setting its own guideline, which was that “translators across the country should strive to serve the building of a New China” so as to better “struggle for the New Democratic China” (Shen 1950:2). Obviously, translation industry at this time was not what it was like before 1949 when translators had the freedom to select source texts according to market needs and personal preference. In 1954 when the Chinese Writers Association held the National Work Conference on Literary Translation, Mao Dun pointed out in his keynote speech that “there are still shortcomings and problems in our work and the most prominent one is the lack of overall planning” (Mao 1954:5). What Mao Dun means by “lack of overall planning” is that source texts were still mainly chosen by translators and private publishers (Mao 1954:6).

Once translation is seen as one of the manifestations of the “national will power”, it is easy to understand why Dong Siqiu should use whether the translated work can serve the people or not as the primary standard in assessing its merit. Obviously, the so-called “shortcoming” is measured more in terms of ideology than in terms of translation quality.

Therefore, whenever translators conducted self-criticism, what was mentioned in the first place was always “the lack of political awareness”, followed by “low proficiency in Russian language”, “low proficiency in Chinese language” and last
but not the least “the lack of scientific knowledge” (Liang 1950:23). Sentences such as “my capitalist opportunism and greed” hinder “the improvement of my proficiency in Russian language, of translation quality and of theoretical level” (Gao 1952:10) were frequently seen in self-criticism reports. Obviously, translators were well aware that once all translation activities were organized by the central government, the political correctness of the translation was far more important than the rhetoric level of translation.

Therefore, the overall planning of translation work and the improvement of translation quality are closely linked. The “quality of translation” is determined by how well the translation reflects the communist ideology. Shen Zhiyuan pointed out that to improve the quality of translation, there was a need “to plan our work according to the nation’s need” (Shen 1951:15). As for long-running disputes over “liberal translation or literal translation” and over “be faithful or be fluent”, Shen suggested “correct translation theories and widely-recognized standard” should be employed as “guidelines for translation practice” (Shen 1951:16). The so-called “correct translation theories and widely-recognized standard” are none other than those that are recognized by the authority and are easy to be utilized in the systematic management of translation activities.

Translation quality, originally largely determined by the translator’s translation skills, became part of the collective discourse and was placed under the mercy of “the overall planning” and “the authority”. Whenever translation mistakes were founded, the translator had to “apologize sincerely to the Party, to the Yan’an Liberation Press, and to the reader” (He 1950:15). The overall planning of translation work thus becomes the foundation and pre-requisite for the improvement of translation quality.

II

Once translation work was incorporated in the system, the next step was to “unite all the translators through a certain system” (Hu 1994:7) so as to “organize translation work according to the needs of the government and the people” (Hu 1994:1). How to systemize translation work thus became a major topic for discussion during the conference. Shen Zhiyuan proposed in his conference speech:

A system must be put in place: the implementation of the national translation plan wouldn’t be possible without a sound system... A management system for the publishing industry that includes state-owned

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2 Some translated texts, published during the late Qing and the Republican period when translation was not manipulated by mainstream ideology, are still highly regarded by the contemporary and celebrated as “the classic”. Even translators nowadays cannot surpass those in respects of techniques and aesthetic taste.
publishers, public publishers, and joint state-private publishers should be installed.

…

Both the public publisher and joint state-private publisher need to actively participate in the execution of the national translation plan. Each and every publisher should report to the authority on a regular basis about its plans and progress. This is the system that we need to put in place in order to ensure success in overall planning and systemization. (Shen 1951:15)

It is obvious that, as Director of the Translation Bureau, Shen Zhiyuan attaches great importance to the management of the publishing industry.

Shen Zhiyuan’s proposal on the management of the publishing industry is relevant because in order to make translated texts reach the reader and subsequently produce certain social impact, translation, especially literary translation, has to be published by publishers. It is no exaggeration to say that publishing is key to the translation production process. Once the operation model is set up, the publisher can then decide, according to the criteria set by the authority, whether a certain work is publishable, who can be the translator, whether the translated work needs amendments after internal audit, what amendments are necessary, and whether the translated work can be promoted and marketed after the examination of its potential social impact. With this in mind, one wouldn’t find it surprising that GAPP should include the Translation Bureau as its affiliation.

Neither Shen Zhiyuan nor Mao Dun had a favourable opinion of the market-oriented translation industry before 1949. However, we should be aware that the reader factor is the most important consideration when it comes to maximize profits. Only when the reader likes the translated work can it sell and can the publisher make profits. In other words, the market is where the reader’s interests are best protected. The market, however, is precisely what Mao Dun and his followers accused as the culprit for hurting the reader’s interests. What are the reader’s interests after all? Mao Dun, in the name of the nation, naturally thought he could best explain it on behalf of the reader: the reader should be educated politically and ideologically by what they read. Obviously, the communist ideology is exactly what the government tries to convey to the reader through books. In reality, the politically-correct translated work is not so much what the reader wants than the demand of the dominant ideology. Translation is thus no “personal issue”. The subtle change in the relationship between the publication of literature and the reader epitomizes the dynamic between “the market” and publication before and after 1949. Before 1949, publishers, mostly self-financed private businesses, and the reader were strongly interrelated in that reader’s response to the market was one crucial profit indicator. Once the publishing industry is
nationalized and incorporated into the overall planning, it doesn’t have to concern itself with the market response since the nation bears all costs of publication, even employees’ wage and performance evaluation are not affected by the publisher’s financial performance (Wang 1997:14). Therefore, “the reader”, in Shen Zhiyuan and Mao Dun’s eyes, was not a concept traditionally defined by the market but one defined by the political ideology.

In a word, Shen Zhiyuan and Mao Dun were alert to see that the restructuring and control of the operation model in the publishing industry could lay solid foundation for the planification and systematization of translation activities.

“The Decision to Consolidate Xinhua Bookstores across the Nation”, promulgated in April 1950, stipulated that Xinhua Bookstores should be consolidated for greater efficiency and better professional service so as to better serve the nation and people and shift its focus on publishing translated works on Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought (Xu 1994:208). In September, GAPP requested all publicly-owned and privately-owned publishers to separate publication from distribution and publication from printing so as to professionalize publication. In December, the five biggest private publishers, namely, Commercial Press, Zhonghua Book Company, Kaiming Book Company, SDX Joint Publishing Company and Lianying Joint Publishing Company, with their over 80 branches were merged to form China Book Distribution Company, the second national book distribution system apart from Xinhua Bookstore. In 1954, China Book Distribution Company was merged into Xinhua Bookstore, and thus a unified distribution system was finally established in China (Xu 1994:208).

The publication of translated literature was greatly affected by the consolidation of publishers across the nation. Big publishers such as the Commercial Press, SDX Joint Publishing Company and Zhonghua Book Company were restricted to publishing certain types of books and didn’t publish any more translated books after the 1950s. Translated literature could only be published by new state-owned publishers, such as People’s Publishing House (Est. 1951), Shanghai Fine Arts Publishing House (Est. 1958), China Youth Publishing House (Est. 1950), China Drama Press(Est. 1957), China Film Press(Est. 1956) and China Children Publishing House(Est. 1952). Such arrangement could, on one hand, facilitate the overall planning and co-ordination of publication and, on the other hand, enable easy control of the translation and publication of foreign literature (Zha/Xie 2007:560-561). According to statistics, during the period from 1949 to 1966, 460 British and American translated works were published by 53 publishers, half of which were published by People’s Literature Press and Shanghai Fine Arts Publishing House and 70 of which were published by the other 35 publishers (Sun 1996:185-186).
III

From the late Qing to the Republic of China, translation played a crucial role in the “modernization” of Chinese literature and culture. Even-Zohar outlined three social circumstances enabling a situation in which translation would maintain a primary position and contribute significantly to the construction of the polynomials of the target culture: when a literature is “young”, or in the process of being established; when a literature is “peripheral” or “weak” or both; and when a literature is experiencing a “crisis” or turning point, or even when a culture is at its literary vacuum stage (Even-Zohar 2004:200-201). Translated literature in the period between the late Qing and May Fourth Movement played a leading role in promoting the development of Chinese literature, politics, and society. Through the medium of translation, the Chinese society was able to get in touch with a variety of Western ideas, which shaped ideological diversity in China. Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought gradually dominated China after 1949 and the unified ideology facilitated the construction of a self-sufficient, stable social system. In such circumstances, the translated literature was marginalized in the cultural system, particularly in the literature system and its impact on the systems was minimized.

After the establishment of government-controlled organizations and art institutions, and the systematization of literary translation management and publication, the translated literature’s role as a tool in the service of the political ideology was strengthened. On one hand, translated literature was “a tool for political struggle” (Chen 2000:383), should reflect the communist ideology and needed to “adapt to” the “new politics”, “new economy”, and “new culture” (Shen 1950:2); On the other hand, translated literature should be “the vanguard of the ‘Leaning to One Side’ policy”3 and “the pioneer of anti-imperialism” (Sun 1949:3). Translation thus became “a political job” (Jin 1951:9).

In most cases, the translated literature can only retain its right to speak when it succeeds in evading the political discourse and ideology. In China, translation was used to consolidate the literary and cultural system in the dominant ideology, losing its primary function in introducing new ideologies and poetics. Foreign literary works that were not conducive to the construction of dominant ideology but could enrich the target language were rejected by the literary system. Political ideology became the principal criterion in the selection of literary texts for translation.

3 In 1949, Mao Zedong put forward the proposal that China should follow the example of the Soviet Union in all aspects, which subsequently became PRC’s foreign policy in the first half of the 1950s.
Influenced and manipulated by ideology, some well-known translators turned to translate books they previously were not interest in. For example, after the 1950s, Fu Lei (1908-1966) shifted his focus to translating the literary works of Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), an important reason being that Balzac was highly regarded by Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). Although Fu Lei, a prestigious translator, was able to make ends meet only with the remuneration he earned, it didn’t mean, without getting wages from the Chinese Writers Association, he could translate whatever that befitted his aesthetic taste and personal preference. With the regrouping of publishers and the banning of private publishers, translators had to comply with the norms set by the authority and suppress their aesthetic tastes in order to make a living (Ma 2003:373). The privilege Fu Lei enjoyed in the choice of source texts was also limited in that he could only select from the list of works provided by the “patron”, in this case, the government.

Of course, there were still some translators who didn’t abide by the rules set by the authority and translated whatever they like; however, it was impossible for their translation to be published. For instance, Zha Liangzhen (1918-1977) was “labelled as a counter-revolutionary” in 1958, deprived of his teaching job, and subjected to confinement and persecution. Unemployed, Zha spent eight years to translate Byron's Don Juan. During the latter stages of the Cultural Revolution, he translated poems such as those of Soviet modernist poet Fyodor Tyutchev (1803-1873), British modernist poet Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965), and Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973). A translator and poet working outside the “system”, Zha was able to translate works he preferred in his personal space. Undoubtedly, his translation could never be published at that time, not only because he was a “counter-revolutionary” but because the modernist literature he translated didn’t meet the system’s selection criteria (Zha 2003:64).

In the early days of PRC, it was common among literary translators to link up their work to politics, just as Jin Ren (1910-1971), a well-known translator, commented: “Translation is, was and will always be a political act. It is only translators sometimes consciously serve politics, and sometimes unconsciously”(Jin 1951:9-10).

Bibliography


