

Cultural Turn and Chinese Literature's Go-global: Problems and Solutions

Lei Dai

Department of English, Wuhan University of Technology
Wuhan, China

Abstract—This research aims to explore the problems of the global promotion of China's literature and propose practical solutions. It is argued that the Go-global initiative involves a reasonable amount of literary works in the original Chinese language so that the targeted readers will gain a better understanding of China and its culture. Centering on the appointment of translators, the study affirms that it is the collaboration between senior native translators and overseas Sinologists that will guarantee progress in the comprehension and re-expression phases of the literary translation. As for the usage of translation strategies, foreignization and domestication should be collocated in line with the specific context and readership on the premise that readers can and would like to read these books. The key argument of this paper is that under no circumstances should the typical writing styles of Chinese literature be intentionally adapted to the aesthetics of Western readers. This is because Chinese literature is not only for the foreign-oriented publicity purposes but to be cherished as one of the most valuable cultural heritages of the nation.

Keywords—Cultural turn; Chinese literature; Foreign-oriented publicity; Go-global; Translators; Cultural confidence

I. THE CULTURAL TURN IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

The cultural turn in translation studies helps broaden researchers' horizon from the myopic linguistic tier to the greater cultural one, enabling them to value the target culture, translator's subjectivity and the analysis of strategic choices under dynamic contexts. Thanks to its continuous development, studies on translation strategies have also spilled over the single linguistic perspective into the more significant context including culture, society, politics, history, ideology and institutions. In other words, translation studies since the inception of cultural turn have emancipated from language and text, empowering translators and shedding more light on the sociocultural context where a specific translation activity took place. "Multiple dimensions such as the rise and demise of a nation, social development, cultural context should be considered when exploring the translation activities of a specific nation" [1].

At present, China's desire to spread its culture and literature to the rest of the world is ever growing given its rising national strength and international influence thanks to its reform and opening-up drive since 1978. Against this background, this paper will discuss the problems against this initiative, reflecting on the reasons behind and proposing solutions accordingly. With the choice of translation strategies, namely foreignizing

and domesticating, as a centerpiece, the analysis will ponder about their benefits and drawbacks amid China's international promotion of its literature.

II. PROBLEMS WITH CHINESE LITERATURE'S GO-GLOBAL

Mo Yan's winning of the 2012 Nobel Literary Prize has exerted a far-reaching impact on the global realm of literature. Apart from that, the radical adaptive translation used by Howard Goldblatt, a world renowned American Sinologist, has been dramatically controversial. It is acclaimed as a quintessential way to promote abroad Chinese literature, because "the ideal translator for Chinese literature is a Sinologist who can translate into his mother tongue and is meanwhile familiar with Chinese language, culture and literature" [2]. However, gradually, increasing doubts have overshadowed the praise, claiming that "Goldblatt penetrates the bottom line of intercultural communication by being an accomplice of cultural filtering and misunderstanding" [3]. Facing different feedback, Goldblatt questioned "can a writer's one piece of work represent the entire Chinese literature? Can it be counted as global when the works wins the title? Can it still count if it is unpopular with readers but favored by the Nobel Prize panel? What are Chinese writers after? A mass of readers or a small group of people?" [4]. Many factors should be involved with China's literary promotion: not only the translation issue (who and how to translate), but also the competence of the writer, the quality of the work and so on.

A. Who to translate

The most important work concerned involve the selection of works to promote, the designation of translator and the usage of translation strategies, among which a suitable translator matters most seen from translation studies. Mo's success is admittedly inseparable from Goldblatt's efforts. But at the second thought, it is easy to find that Mo is not China's leading writer and before him Lao She, Lin Yutang and many other brilliant scholars had applied for the prize but all in vain. This essentially proves that it is a good choice to ask competent Sinologists to translate. As one of Nobel judges points out: "a Chinese, no matter how good his English is, should not try to translate Chinese literature into English. To achieve this, a learned native English speaker is desirable as he knows how to express the message in English. Some of the published translated works by Chinese are indeed awful" [5].

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For long, there have been two types of literary translators for Chinese literature: natives and Sinologists. Native translators are specializing in translating literature due to their strong English abilities. They are often concurrently scholars, poets or writers who translate and publish their own or others' works. By contrast, Sinologists have a profound understanding of Chinese language, culture and history. Over decades, it is a shame, however, that the publishing sector in China has been dubious of those people, claiming that they can never restore the Chinese culture in their translation because it is the Chinese that can completely understand their literature. Moreover, they cringe at the thought that a handful of these Westerners may viciously distort Chinese culture and therefore there has always been a stringent censorship in this regard. Conversely, most of the native writers, except a few emigrants who have been abroad for a long time, are inadequate for the English language and culture, thus failing the aesthetic expectations of the target readers. Their translations are either plagued with grammatical errors or unattractive due to a Chinglish mindset. Therefore, it is difficult for those works to be well received in the global market, let alone generating a lasting impact.

For example, *The Story of the Stone*, one of China's most distinctive classical novel, has been translated both by Chinese literary translators and British Sinologists. The result turned out to be controversial. The Sinologists' versions were criticized in China for their unrealistic representations of the traditional Chinese culture. However, a simple fact is often overlooked: who are the readers? Are they for Chinese linguists to study comparatively the two languages or for Western readers to understand China and its literature? We praise Chinese translators for faithfully re-expressing the original text from the linguistic viewpoint. However, what is the point of literary translation if it is relegated to a kind of intellectual game for bilingual scholars? Its real function is to promote literary works effectively to the international market regardless of the possible attacks from critics at home. According to statistics [6], the influence and reception of the versions by Chinese translators are dwarfed by Sinologist ones both in terms of citation rate and the times of re-prints.

B. *Literary translation strategies: foreignization or domestication*

Which of the two translation strategies should be prioritized in literary translation has always been a bone of contention in translation studies. Those for foreignizing believe that a translation should respect cultural differences and value fidelity while those for domesticating put target readers' understanding first. Still others eclectically argue the two strategies should work in tandem. But according to a recent survey, there tends to be a dual standard: "foreignizing is used primarily when translating foreign works into Chinese while domesticating is used more frequently when translating from Chinese into English" [7]. China's Go-global, in terms of the translation dimension, is to make it easier for the foreign readership to understand the culture-specific message in a literary work through reading its translation.

Still taking *The Story of the Stone* as an example, the translations by Chinese translators were not received as well as the Sinologists' because they attempted to force the traditional

Chinese culture into the Western readership through an excessive use of foreignizing. Chinese culture is drastically different from those of English-speaking countries, and the enormous portrayal of ancient China makes it more difficult to transfer Chinese cultural expressions intact to English. Admittedly, the work itself is classic in China's literary world, but just as traditional Chinese medicine tastes bitter despite its wonderful effects, the cultural transfer without being adapted to the comprehension ability of the Western readers is doomed to fail. That is why the essentially bitter medicine is now often coated with sweet flavours to make it less unpalatable. Likewise, the Sinologists' versions are much more popular because the domesticating, explaining and deleting strategies they used make the Chinese culture easier to be received. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to facilitate the readers' understanding of the typically Chinese culture through coordinating the use of different translation strategies.

C. *How to select representative works which are meanwhile easy to be received*

British Sinologist Julia Lovell once pointed out: "for decades, it remains difficult for Chinese literary works to be received by English readers. You will inevitably find such books on a less-than-1m-long shelf in even the best academic bookshop in the university town of Cambridge." [8]. Besides the use of translation strategies, another contributor to this unpopularity is the awkward Chinese writing genre, which in Goldblatt's remarks is "Chinese writers are obsessed with everything about China but overlook a key factor in creative writing: the book must be appealing" [4]. Also, with regard to China's recent zest for sponsoring its literary works to go global, many scholars are worried that such promotion while neglecting the target aesthetics will only end up with negligence by the overseas readers. Moreover, some books and essays are downright unworthy for funded promotion since they would do nothing but affect China's academic fame.

It is argued in this paper that the problem with the selection of literary works for global promotion is also in fact caused by cultural differences. As we know, Chinese take rice as staple food and use chopsticks while Westerners like floor-made products and use fork and knife. If we force Westerners to eat rice with chopsticks, they will be mad. Likewise, each country's literature is deeply influenced by its politics, ideology, aesthetics and so on. The inappropriate Chinese works compelled into the Western world will meet fiasco just as many of those transplanted human organs. A Chinese saying goes like "do not give others what you do not like". Ironically, when it comes to exporting one's literature, foreigners are not necessarily willing to read it even though it is valued by the natives. So the saying may be revised as "even if you like something very much, do not share it with others arbitrarily". Admittedly, it is unnecessary to align China's writing genres with Western ones. But their tastes, interest and comprehension should be considered so that only those suitable works are spread if China earnestly wants to show its literary treasure and win global acclaims.

III. SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

A. *Translators: the collaboration between native translators and overseas Sinologists*

It is emphasized in this study that a country's cultural influence is determined by its economic strength. Despite the various government grants to promote literature abroad, the best possible solution remains economic prosperity which will invite more readers in. Therefore, the researcher argues that a straightforward way to make Chinese literature global is to promote them untranslated, as in the original texts. People may challenge it by questioning how Western readers can understand Chinese, which will be retorted as why there are so many English books to read, to borrow and to buy in China. This is fundamentally because English now ranks as China's second most popular language. Besides, the Chinese enjoy English works, be they movies or books, so much so that they would rather take the trouble to consult a dictionary than read a translated version. Likewise, with China's rising affluence, more and more world attention will be captured. Westerners are taking the initiative to learn Chinese and read books originally in it. In a word, to sell one's products, one has to be first and foremost confident in them. Without sufficient confidence in one's own language, how can the home culture go global decently?

But if a work entails translation, the collaboration between senior native translators and sophisticated overseas Sinologists is preferable, with the former finishing the main part of the translation work and the latter polishing it up according to the English linguistic and cultural features and target readers' aesthetics. The works will sell well thanks to this perfect match. But before enormous market input, a small number of respondents can read the book on a trial basis and based on their feedback, the translation can be revised again and again.

B. *Foreignizing preferred as long as the translation is clear and understandable*

It is argued that foreignizing be prioritized when translating Chinese literature abroad on the premise that understanding is not compromised. Only in this way can Chinese cultural essences be transferred to the target readership. This research disagrees to adjusting the content and format of the source text to Westerners' aesthetics, because one's sense of beauty is likely to change throughout his lifetime and may vary from individual to individual. Rather, efforts should be made to improve Chinese literary works. Admittedly, given the individualistic reading habits, domesticating can be used occasionally when Chinese expressions are rendered, so that readers can effectively figure out the meaning of the text. Additionally, annotations can work in tandem with foreignizing, enabling readers to understand the key message as well as the specific usage of Chinese expressions.

C. *Translating the works that will probably be attractive to the target readers*

Market surveys are indispensable before translating. For example, the works to be translated will differ between the well-educated white people in the USA and the Black living in poverty-inflicted areas. As an ideological output, cultural

transfer should have clear and effective targets. It is argued in this paper that literary works not be created intentionally for the prospective Western readers in that literature must be first native and then international. A country's historical and cultural identity would be at risk if it were bent on pandering to the taste of the target readership. With China's growing prosperity, readers in the English world will proactively reach the nation by reading its literature. China's cultural go-global initiative is essentially to promote its culture abroad. But just as a business, if it is strong enough, it will not need aggressive sales and promotion strategies. Therefore, focusing on developing its economy and writing quality literary works will help promote Chinese literature abroad.

IV. CONCLUSION

Problems with China's cultural go-global initiative and suggested solutions have been discussed in this paper in the perspective of the cultural turn theory. More specifically, it is argued that cultural promotion involve a certain amount of works in the original Chinese language because a growing number of foreigners will reach the Chinese language and literary works thanks to China's growing prosperity. At present, the best possible choice of translators is a collaboration between senior native translators and overseas Sinologists, which will maximally ensure the smooth progress in the two key phases of understanding and re-expressing. Additionally, foreignizing should work in tandem with domesticating to make translations approachable to readers, with the former enabling readers to taste a different culture and the latter facilitating their understanding of those obscure cultural expressions. Concerning the choice of the works to be translated and their quality, the paper rejects the deliberate alterations of typically Chinese writing genres just for the sake of Western preferences. This is because Chinese literature exists not simply for global promotion but as the witness and heritage of its national development. Besides, target readers' interest should be taken into account when selecting works to translate. Surveys should be carried out before translation. The ones that will arouse readers' interest are preferable.

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