



# A Probe into English Translation of Yan'an Literary Works from Relevance Theory and Text Types

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**Abstract.** The development of economy and culture in various countries is unbalanced. In the social activities of literature communication, the discourse power of world literature is in inequality. Translation is the first step for Yan'an literature and art and even Chinese modern and contemporary literature to go global. Under the guidance of relevance theory of translation, this paper taking Yan'an literary translation as an example, discusses the choice of translation strategies in the process of Chinese modern and contemporary literature entering the world literature, probes into how relevance theory and text types work, and therefore reaching a conclusion that relevance theory and text types can be well applied to literary translation.

**Keywords:** Relevance theory · Text type · Yan'an literature and art

## 1 Introduction

China is not only a rapidly rising economic power, but also a pluralistic cultural entity closely linked to the world culture. However, many overseas scholars and common readers still have limited understanding of Chinese modern and contemporary literature, and obviously Chinese cultural influence cannot match with its economic power in the world. Chinese literature is an integral part of world literature, and making Chinese literature “Going global” through translation has always been the goal of national efforts. Since the 21st century, the translation, publication and overseas studies of Chinese literature have been developing rapidly, and the quality of translation has also been improving. However, it is a long way to enhance the depth and breadth of the overseas dissemination of Chinese literary translation and to promote the national culture through translation. The current situation of the overseas dissemination and acceptance of Chinese literature, including Yan'an literature and art, is far from meeting the expectations, which is reflected in the following areas:

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First of all, compared with the great efforts of the national publishing house, the influence and dissemination of Chinese literary translation works are relatively lagging behind. For example, *The Panda Books* of the 1980s are a set of English versions of Chinese Classics, legends and histories translated since the 1990s; the “Great Chinese Library Project” has translated Chinese classics from the pre-Qin period to modern times, in the fields of culture, history, philosophy, economy, military affairs, science and technology; In the 21st century, many Chinese literary works have been rendered through the “Chinese Book Promotion Program”(2004), “The Translation and Introduction Project of 100 Excellent Works of Contemporary Chinese literature”(2006), “The Translation and Publication Project of Chinese Cultural Works”(2009) and “The Chinese Academic Translation Project of the China Social Science Foundation”(2010). Yet there are only a handful of translated works of Chinese literature on the shelves of bookstores and libraries in Britain and the United States. As Goldblatt (2000) wrote: if you want to find my translation of Pai Hsien-yung’s *Crystal Boys* in a bookstore, you need to find Hsien-yung at the end of the “H”, and it’s like finding Henry Roth’s novels under the Henry list. “American literature only focuses on itself,” said Zhang Xudong, an American scholar with Chinese descent. “All the translated literature in American literature accounts for only 1%, which is incredibly small.”

Secondly, in the literary academia and in the global book market, the readers of the translated works of Chinese literature are few, and the Chinese literature has not win its place yet. Western literature, on the other hand, is relatively strong in the academic world and the book market in China, and translation activities now are mainly performed by the translation of foreign literature into Chinese rather than Chinese into other Western languages. Mo Yan arguably own the most works translated into other countries, and he is one of the most influential Chinese contemporary writer ever to be introduced to a foreign language, especially when he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012. However when Mo Yan’s *Red Sorghum* and *the Garlic Ballads* were translated into Swedish in 1997 and 2001 respectively, only 1,000 copies were initially printed and weren’t sold out until Mo Yan got the Nobel Prize in Literature, and it is the prize that made the printed works finally sold out.

Lastly, foreign scholars do not have a high opinion of the translation and introduction of Chinese literature. For example, Canadian sinologist Michael S. Duke believes that for serious Chinese literature to gain international recognition, there are many great obstacles. British sinologist Julia Lovell thinks “Chinese literature is neglected in the West”. British sinologist Edward Jenner points out that some translations of *Panda Books* make western sinologists feel “Ridiculous”. Translation, as a medium of literary communication, does not mean a simple transformation between texts. Taking Yan’an literature and art as an example, works created in Yan’an period, which reflect the social and cultural features of China’s revolutionary era, have not received due recognition abroad, and the quality of the translated version is possibly a factor to blame.

“Yan’an literature and art” originated from Mao Zedong’s “Talks at Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art”. In 1943, when the speech was published in *Liberation Daily*, it was the first official use of the term “Yan’an literature and art” [4]. In the history of Chinese new literature, the formation and development of Yan’an literature and art is one of the greatest literary and cultural practices of Chinese new literature. Chinese modern

and contemporary literature originated around the May 4th movement. However, some traditions of Chinese modern and contemporary literature were formed after 1949 by the strong systematization of Yan'an literature of this particular period. Yan'an is the Holy Land of modern Chinese Revolution. Yan'an literature and art was born in the most difficult period of Chinese revolution and played a vital role in the march of Chinese revolutionary literature and literary modernization.

In view of the powerful dynamic resources and spiritual system provided by Yan'an literature and art, the works and writers in Yan'an period have become the focus of research in world literature, and a large number of Yan'an works have been translated into English, a large number of English literature or paper related to Yan'an has also been rendered into Chinese. However, it needs to be pointed out that, in the face of the efforts made in the translation and introduction of Yan'an literature and art, the attention of western readers to Yan'an literature and art is obviously inadequate at present, the dilemma of Yan'an literature translation and introduction is mainly related to the following three reasons:

Firstly, the academia holds negative opinion to Yan'an literature and art. Since 1980s, influenced by western Enlightenment discourse, Chinese contemporary literary research circles generally consider Yan'an literature and art works as political appendages, lacking literary value, and the effort of Yan'an literary translation activities has been denied;

Secondly, translation studies mostly focus on translation phenomena or activities initiated or generated by the target language society, but pay less attention to translation phenomena or activities in the source language society. As a result, Yan'an literature and art have been neglected overseas, which has influenced the efforts of the domestic translation and introduction of Yan'an literature and art.

Finally, the scarcity of historical materials and other materials has further hindered the research and exploration in this field.

## **2 Translation of Yan'an Literature and Art from the Perspective of Relevance Theory of Translation**

In the development of human civilization, translation plays an active role in enhancing mutual understanding among nations and promoting cultural exchanges between different languages. Translation practice has existed for thousands of years [1]. People study translation from different directions [2]. Translation is an inter-lingual communicative act, and communication is one of the important methods in the study of translation. British translator and translation theorist Peter Newmark proposed that "Translation is basically a means of communication" (Peter Newmark, 1983 [8]). With the change of the concept of communication, the concept of translation also develops. Relevance theory is a new cognitive approach to communication proposed by Sperber and Wilson, which provides a new approach to communication as well as to translation studies. In 1991, Ernst-August Gutt published *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*. Gutt's relevance-based translation theory brings a new perspective to translation studies, and Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory is sufficient to explain translation phenomena (Gutt, 1991 [5]) according to Gutt. *Translation and relevance: Cognition and Context* is still influential in the field of translation studies.

## 2.1 Relevance Theory and Text Types

Translation theory must study the function of language to determine the type of text. There are many theoretical problems in translation, such as equivalence, variables and constants, ideal translation unit, and translation process, etc. In the past translation studies and practice, translation researchers have been focusing on the “form and function”. Koller believes that equivalence is relative. And “Formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence” transforms translation studies into reader response from information transmission. In fact, relevance research based on cognitive linguistics is an alternative model of “Formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence”, which is regarded as a kind of “Corrective” theory of translation theory. Newmark divided language functions into six categories: the expressive function, the informative function, the vocative function, the phonic function, the aesthetic function, and the metalinguistic function. A text may have one function, or several functions. On this basis, text can be divided into six types. Jacobson’s theory of language function is most suitable for analyzing the translation of texts. Text categorization by language function is not the only yardstick, and there are other ways to categorize text. Condoleezza Rice, the representative of functionalism, based her research on the “Scientific research model” of language function, which was put forward by the German psychologist Blur in 1938. Condoleezza Rice’s classical typological model compares the typological classifications of comparative linguistics, semiotics, and structuralism, and divides texts into information functional texts, expressive functional texts, operational functional texts, and auditory media texts.

In short, to better understand the concept of translation, we need to analyze the labels of “Types of texts” or “Acts of communication”. As Hatim and Munday point out, “Communication, like other phenomena in the world, needs to create and label special terms to distinguish between particular texts or utterances.” (Hatim, B& Munday J, 2004:272 [6]) In text linguistics, Beaugrande proposes to treat text itself as a unit of translation, by labeling text with text types such as tributes, novels, plays, reviews, and abstracts. From a communicative point of view, these labels play an important role. They can play a coordinating role between the intention of the communicator and the expectation of the reader. For example, if the communicator identifies his text as a “Report”, the “Report” tag helps trigger the reader’s intent, and the reader will not expect to read this text with other tags (such as sarcasm). In this way, these tags, which can lead to different communicative effects, play an important pragmatic role in coordinating the activities of the communicator and the audience.

From the view of relevance theory, the communicator can lead the audience to find the optimal relevance by attaching appropriate labels. If the label given to the text is “Novel”, then the audience should look for the relevance of the novel plot, characterization, social norms and standards. The audience does not look for associations in a text labeled as “novel” that only a “historical reference book” can have, such as historical facts and sources of material citations. From this we can see that text type tags can play a significant role in guiding the audience to understand the author’s intentions and can reduce the psychological cost of the audience when establishing relationships. From this point of the view, text type tags can act as pragmatic functions to help improve the relevance of text or discourse.

## 2.2 Yan'an Literature and Art and Text Types

With regard to Yan'an literature and art, Yan'an literature and art is a literary formed with Chinese local experience. Marking the text type of Yan'an literature and art in the process of translation and dissemination is helpful for the translator to choose the appropriate translation method. It will help readers to improve their relevance with the translated version and their reading experience, and it will also help Yan'an literature and art gradually integrate into the target language culture, thus enhancing the acceptance of Yan'an literature and art and the popularity of the translated version.

First of all, identifying and marking language text types can help translators to determine the appropriate level of equivalence required for a particular translation purpose, and thus to formulate appropriate translation strategies. The theory of translation tries to distinguish the types of texts and to formulate specific translation strategies according to different types of texts. Text type determines the translator's translation method and is the primary factor that influences the translator's choice of appropriate translation method. For example, the reading of Yan'an literature and art in the United States is mainly limited to the academia circle. The information content carried by Yan'an literature and art is the main attention of readers in this circle. And the text type of Yan'an literature and art is marked as information type, so the main task of the translator is not to convey the aesthetic and artistic form of the original text, but to maximize the information function of Yan'an literature and art by direct translation, and in keeping with the requirement of direct translation to preserve the language and style of translation, in order to faithfully convey professional literature information in the field of humanities.

Secondly, marking Yan'an literature and art as an information category can reduce the readers' aesthetic appeal to literature. In the process of readers' reading, the dominant factor is information transmission, and the aesthetic factor is only as a supplement [3]. The expectation of the reader of the text is not the function of the mood and emotion of the language, but the acquisition of information, so that the reader can match the direct translation of the translator in the perspective of expectation, to enhance the relevance of readers and Yan'an literary translation, improve readers' reading experience, and gradually enhance the international influence of Yan'an literature and art.

Finally, the text type can decide the translation strategy to some extent, but not completely. It can only decide the basic strategy in translation, and the final strategy should consider the influence of other factors. For example, many texts do not have a single function, which means a text may have several functions at the same time, which Condoleezza Rice calls "Compound types." The essence of Yan'an literature and art is literary works, so the aesthetic and artistic quality of Yan'an literature and art cannot be denied. When Yan'an literature and art enter the world literature context, the classification of Yan'an literature and art will be marked as information, which will help Yan'an literature and art gradually integrate into the target language culture, When Yan'an literature and art become more popular in foreign cultures, the translator should gradually convey the aesthetic and artistic forms of the original works of Yan'an literature and art. Translator should pay more attention to the form of the original text on the basis of ensuring the content is correct, and strive for the same aesthetic effect between the translated text and the original text.

Of course, the effect of text tag's association enhancement depends on how much the communicator and the audience can agree with each other when using the text respectively. In the process of communication, the higher the degree of mutual identification, the greater the role of text type labels.

### 3 The Limitation of Relevance Theory and the Future Prospect of "Literature Going Global"

Each theory has its own limitations, and relevance theory is no exception. Since the introduction of relevance theory, the study of relevance theory has been deepened in China, and great achievements have been made in pragmatics, translation and Second Language Teaching. However, there are still some limitations in domestic research, which need to be explored and innovated in the future research. Relevance theory is of great significance to translation studies, but it is far from being perfect. "Relevance theory is not established for translation studies, and its guidance to translation practice has many limitations" (Wang Jianguo, 2003:37 [9]). The biggest shortcoming of relevance theory is that "relevance" is a qualitative concept, so it is an obstacle to the measurement of relevance. Applying the concept of "relevance" to translation studies may lead to some personal and subjective assessments. Professor He Ziran pointed out: "The concept of relevance... is quite abstract, ambiguous and difficult for readers to understand." (He Ziran, 1998 [7]) meanwhile, relevance theory of translation also requires translation scholars to constantly improve and enrich their translation practice. For example, from the perspective of text corpus, there are relatively few targeted studies on Chinese corpus and other language corpus except English. Domestic scholars have not made full use of the advantages of the Chinese language and lack of Chinese characteristics in their research. From the research methods, theoretical explanations of phenomena are rarely innovative and too formulaic, and lack of qualitative or quantitative empirical research. Based on the above, the study of relevance theory of translation in China should pay more attention to the following aspects in the future: first, we can pay more attention to the domestic classic or characteristic corpus and study it from a broader perspective. Second, we can use more theoretical analysis connected with corpus research or experimental research to explain the phenomenon, so that the research results are more systematic. Third, more research can be combined with other disciplines to make the study more comprehensive and practical.

Based on the apparent mismatch between China's economic power and its global cultural influence, Chinese literary translators and policy makers should pay attention to the frustrated reality of this cultural soft power, and prepare to lead future research direction of "Going global" in Chinese modern and contemporary literature:

Firstly, from the perspective of world literature, the process of Chinese literature's going global will be the process of Chinese literature transcending itself in the confrontation with the literature of different nationalities and in the process of the struggle for literary discourse rights. When Grado Labs put forward the concept of "World Literature", Weimar Germany was deeply influenced by French culture, and German native literature was under the shadow of Paris. Many German intellectuals fought against the French cultural colonization with German folk literature. In this cultural predicament,

by reading and studying a lot the literature of various ethnic groups, Grado Labs found a new way to seek a literary form that was different from either the metropolitan culture of Paris or the narrow German nationalism, and then "World literature" emerged as a solution. Taking Yan'an literature and art as an example, Yan'an literature and art is war literature that transcends narrow nationalism. Some scholars believe that "Yan'an literature and art merge into world literature" is a historical proposition, because whether Yan'an literature and art can merge into the new pattern of world literature in the future is a historical concept, only time will tell. And yet, it's not hard to see, Yan'an literature and art was once a part of world literature: the pattern of world literature has been undergoing profound changes along with the historical evolution of the world, and Yan'an literature and art was deeply influenced by the former Soviet Union. As a part of the world left-wing trend of thought, Yan'an literature and art itself is a part of the world revolutionary literature. In the process of Chinese literature going to the world, we should have a grand stand beyond narrow nationalism.

Secondly, through the scientific exposition and analysis of the existing situation of Yan'an literature and art in the United States, this paper discusses the feasibility of Yan'an literature and art communication experience and communication strategy framework, and the formation of China's "Chinese culture go globally" strategic framework is one of the focuses of future research. The pattern of world literature is not invariable. Taking translation of Yan'an literature and art in the United States as an example, it is of great theoretical and practical significance to analyze the survival of Yan'an literature and art in the world literature. In the process of dialogue between modern and contemporary Chinese literature and world literature, the similarities and differences between the generation and development of Yan'an literature and the contemporary cultural environment are studied, analyzed and interpreted, from the survival reflection of Yan'an literature and art in the United States to experience summary and theoretical upgrading, thus exploring how Chinese modern and contemporary literature accumulates local experience in a gradual way, strives for the discourse power of Chinese literary theory, and participates in revising the concepts and standards of "World Literature", therefore, it is worth exploring to change the situation of monologue in Western discourse.

The spread of Yan'an literature and art in the United States belongs to the study of the spread and influence of Yan'an literature and art, which generally probes into the spread and influence of Yan'an literature and art in the United States from the perspective of communication, literary comparison or comparative literature, and it mainly involves the following aspects: to examine the ways in which Yan'an literature and art have achieved the goal of literary dissemination to the maximum extent, how to achieve the most direct goal, educate and inspire the most direct audience, and achieve the most remarkable effect; How to realize the presentation, expression and construction of its media, to make its homogenization function and merge with the function of literature; The research also examines the influence of the worldwide spread of Yan'an literature and art on the evolution of the world literature and art trends at that time and in the second half of the 20th century, and the position and significance of Yan'an literature and art in the pattern of world literature.

In the "Communication and influence research" section, a systematic and deep dynamic study of Yan'an literature and art should start from the multi-angles of the

research on the communication ecology, the media, the communication system, the communication mode, the communicator, the audience, and the text content, etc. In research, there must not only always be a broad vision of literary history and theory, but also a vision of world literature, which means systematically summing up the Chinese local experience and the Sinicization of Marxist theory. Among them, the dissemination experience of Yan'an literature and art in the United States provide referential values for the “Chinese culture going globally” strategy.

## 4 Conclusion

As China's national identity and global soft power continue to rise, in the international context of the smooth advancement of the overall “the Belt and Road” initiative, and in the context of the reality of extensive cultural exchanges, the overseas translation and introduction of Chinese modern and contemporary literature is expected to break the shackles of American literature under the values of “Western centralism” to enhance the cultural confidence of the Chinese nation and integrate it into world literature, therefore gradually developing and establishing the position and significance of Chinese modern and contemporary literature in the pattern of world literature. Through the probe into relevance theory and text types, it can be concluded that relevance theory and text types can be well applied to literary translation in the process of Yan'an literature and art and even Chinese modern and contemporary literature going globally.

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