



On the Combination of History and Theory in the Study of Modern Translated Literature in China

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Abstract. The interaction between Chinese and foreign literature after the founding of the People's Republic of China is inseparable from the translation work. As an important window for translating and introducing various cultural and literary works from all over the world, the magazine *World Literature*, published in Chinese in China, brought fresh foreign cultural elements to Chinese literary circle in the 1950s and 1960s, and also became an important link in the construction of contemporary Chinese literary translation history. The monograph *Translation, Literature and Politics: A Case Study of World Literature (1953–1966)* is an important book to take *World Literature* as the object of systematic research. Under the theoretical observation of translation and ideology, poetics, patronage and other theories, through the diachronical collection of historical data and the horizontal discussion of literature polysystem, it shows the readers the real and vivid situation of the translation and introduction of world literature in the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China. It has deepened the understanding of the interaction between translation and literature in contemporary China, and shed light on the research methods of translated literature.

Keywords: *World Literature* · translation study · history · politics

1 Introduction

Translation, Literature and Politics: A Case Study of World Literature (1953–1966) (hereinafter referred to as *Translation, Literature and Politics*), written in Chinese by Dr. Cui Feng, School of Humanities, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, is a literary research monograph finally published after eight years of polishing on the basis of his doctoral thesis. [1] This book was published in Nanjing University Press in March 2019, with about 550,000 words and 599 pages in total. It reviewed the publishing history of the important magazine *World Literature* published in Chinese mainland for more than ten years, and focuses on the literature translation and literary activities in it.

The book closely combines literary translation with the background of the times – “seventeen-year literature” from 1949 to 1966. The interaction and struggle between the literary field and the ideological field constitute an important research clue of the book. Focusing on *World Literature* magazine, the book constructs and makes a “descriptive

translation study” [2] of the translation literature system in the 1950s and 1960s in Chinese mainland after the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Centered on this book, this paper tries to make comments and to have further discussion of the effective methods in describing and analyzing the history of translated literature and the significance of translated texts.

2 Important Elements of Translations in *World Literature*

The book is composed of introduction, main body (four chapters in total), conclusion, references and appendix. In the introduction, the author introduces the research methods, research significance, theoretical perspective and structural arrangement of the book. *Translation, Literature and Politics* places translation activities in a macro historical and cultural space, and explains the purpose and form of literary translation. It combines the history of translation with the relevant research methods of translation studies, which mainly adopts the research approach of the “cultural school” in Translation Studies from the west. [3] The research factors involved are mainly writers (including translators and original authors), readers, and the cultural diversity of the target language inside and outside the system. The book focuses on “the relationship and significance of translated literature and national literature in a specific era” (Cui, 2019:2).

The main body of this book consists of four chapters, which are discussed by historical stages in chronological order. First of all, the first chapter describes and paves the way for the historical and cultural background of the early days of the People’s Republic of China. Guided by historical events such as the convening of the first National Congress of Literary and Artistic Workers after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the establishment of the Federation of Literary and Art Filed and the Association of Literary Artists, and the holding of the First Translation Conference in China, the author discusses the gradually-formed norms concerning translation selection, and new norms of translation in this period from the perspective of social norms. The main factors include new literary and artistic policies, political ideology, mainstream poetics, sponsors, etc. The book holds that after 1949 Chinese mainland gradually established a “relatively stable ‘integrated’ ideology”, which has an important impact on the selection of literary materials for translation. “Political ideology has become the primary standard for the selection of literary translation works.” (Cui, 2019:15) In such a political context, the magazine *Yiwen* (*The Translation*, later renamed *World Literature*) was officially launched in July 1953, with Mao Dun (1896–1981) as its chief editor. It was published by the People’s Literature Publishing House. The editorial department was directly led by the Writers Association of China. It became “the only periodical that translated and introduced foreign literature in Chinese society at that time, almost becoming the main ‘window’ for Chinese readers to understand foreign literature and its dynamics.” (Cui, 2019:56) The book also contains historical data on the purpose of the magazine, the operation mode of the collective responsibility system in the editorial department, and Mao Dun’s guidance and participation in the magazine.

In the second chapter, the author describes the first stage of the publication history of *Yiwen* magazine from July 1953 to March 1956, a total of nearly three years, and mainly discusses the historical facts of the translation and introduction of “Soviet literature

and capitalist literature” (Cui, 2019:16). During this initial period of operation, China followed the Soviet model, and Sino-Soviet relations were in the honeymoon period. Therefore, in terms of material selection, *Yiwen* magazine was largely influenced by ideology, and Soviet literature became the first choice for it to introduce foreign works. The book also looks back on the historical origin of the translation before the founding of the People’s Republic of China and the newly established translation magazine. At the same time, it focuses on the analysis of the historical trend in this period, so as to reflect the interactive relationship between ideology and the production and distribution of translated literature, such as the influence of the literary trend of “Unfreezing Literature” from Soviet Union. In the last section of this chapter, the author extends his vision to the translation and introduction of literature of western countries outside the Soviet Union. Through the comparison of western literature translation and introduction in the context of a special era, the complex relationship between translation, literature and politics can be more illustrated.

It is precisely because of the important changes in Sino-Soviet relations and the enhancement of China’s consciousness of national independence that the third chapter describes the overall publication of *Yiwen* magazine from April 1956 to July 1958 against this background. Centered on *Yiwen*, the scope and criteria of the translation selection of its literary translations reflect China’s reflection on the Soviet model and the change of its attitude towards Soviet literature. The translation and introduction changes brought about by “Unfreezing Literature” are also obvious. In addition, chapter 3 following closely the topic in the previous chapter focuses on the translation and introduction of European and American literature again from the perspective of modernist literature translation and introduction. It is found that in the late 1950s, the translation and introduction of European and American literature is gradually recovering and being re-recognized.

In the fourth chapter of the text, the author takes August 1958 to March 1966 as the time period to sort out the literary history and after the change of the name of *Yiwen* to *World Literature*, highlighting the changes in literary translation brought about by socialist realism. The main feature of this stage is that the vision of literary translation and introduction has been further expanded. Asian, African and Latin American literature had been translated and introduced on a larger scale, and the territory of Chinese literature translation and introduction was broader and diversified. It reflected the changes in literary research brought about by the Sino-Soviet relationship from the honeymoon period to the rupture time, and the realistic situation of constantly adjusting the literary policy in the process of China’s independent road exploration. Finally, this chapter discussed the arrival of the Cultural Revolution and the closure of *World Literature*.

In the conclusion part, the author summarizes and explains the research path and significance of the history of translated literature from the perspective of literary polysystem proposed by the Israeli translation theorist Itamar Even Zohar. [4] The author tries to construct the most important part of the history of translated literature in the “seventeen years” after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, mainly focusing on the publication features and topics of *World Literature*. Because as a national publication in China, the social significance and academic value of *World Literature* are undoubtedly irreplaceable at the moment.

3 Review and Further Discussion

The notion of system and norms has been widely discussed by sociologist [5], and gradually introduced into contemporary translation studies. Beyond the translated text, more elements involved in translation activities are introduced and studies, such as the concept of memes from a cultural approach [6], translation ethics [7]; therefore, the history of translation and its research methods received much attention. [8] In this book, the author clearly applied a cultural research approach in dealing with the affecting factors in translation history of foreign literature in Chinese mainland. The following is the features of this book in arranging and analyzing those materials.

3.1 Combination of History and Theories of Translated Literature

The combination of historical facts and literary theories could be an effective research method to promote the study of the history of literary translation and introduction. The study of translation history focuses on the excavation of historical materials and the extraction of relevant topics from first-hand materials. As far as *World Literature* is concerned, on the one hand, it includes 134 original materials published in the past 14 years, with an average of more than 120 pages per issue. On the other hand, this book combs the macro background of literary activities in the seventeen years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, and has a deep understanding of the working mechanism, review process, and translator's participation of the editorial department of *World Literature*. It is "not easy to master these historical materials in detail, which deterred many researchers" (Cui, 2019:Preface), as Prof. Wang Hongzhi pointed out in the preface of the book, which made the book innovative and breakthrough in materials.

In addition to historical and historical data, this book also integrates a variety of core concepts of translation studies, and discusses in detail from polysystem, poetics, translator's cultural identity and subjectivity, cultural manipulation, dynamic classics, sponsors, etc. The book did a deep analysis of certain important concepts with detailed contents, such as the sponsor theory that is subdivided into the respective roles played by publishing house sponsors, government sponsors and hidden sponsors (Cui, 2019:444) in the literary translation system.

3.2 Emphasis on the Research Methods and Case Studies

Rich case studies are suggested to use to expand the research path of the interplay among translation, literature and ideology. As a monthly magazine, *Yiwen* and the later *World Literature* were published from the first issue in July 1953 to the end of March 1966. The number of translations published was quite large, and the identity of the translator was diverse and complex. Among them, it could be find that the name of the magazine was changed, the issue date was changed from the first day to the 20th of each month, the editing team and guidelines were adjusted, and more importantly, that time witnessed the change of literary and artistic policies brought about by the great changes in China's international environment.

Therefore, it takes a lot of effort to sort out these historical facts. This book, with a wealth of cases, makes a detailed sorting from the multi-dimensional perspectives of the

translation, translator, reviewer, editor, publishing agency, translation process, paratext, social norms, etc. related to translation practice, and expands the research vision of translation studies, especially in the field of translated literature, with the changes and impacts of political language and ideology as the main points of discussion. It provides a good demonstration.

3.3 Investigation and Interpretation of Facts in the Literature Polysystem

For the first time, the book comprehensively and systematically digs the multi-dimensional historical data of *World Literature* magazine. Combining the social and cultural context of the times, it adds an important part to the construction of the translation and literature map of the Chinese mainland in the 1950s and 1960s. It has positive implications for the macro and micro research of *World Literature* and the research of contemporary literature and the relevant polysystem in a certain area.

Moreover, the contents of each issue of *World Literature* listed in the appendix of the book from its inception to its closure are as detailed as possible, including the journal number, translation title, genre (such as poetry, political commentary, novels, etc.), author, country, translator and page number (Cui, 2019:482–595). Besides, it does not simply arrange and list historical materials in a diachronic order, but makes a comprehensive observation and interpretation of the cultural phenomena and causes behind the facts of literary translation.

At the same time, it provides a unique insight into the study of literary development in the 1950s and 1960s in China. The author also paid special attention to the paratext factor in literary translation, and studied the various postscripts and comments in *World Literature*. Thus, the detailed study built a solid foundation for the study of material selection in translation and translation norms. From this comprehensive investigation of those translation facts and the author's interpretation of those literary phenomenon, this book clearly illustrated how politics, literature, and translation interplayed with each other, which could be regarded as the main affecting factors in the history of translated literature in the 1950s to 1960s in China.

4 Conclusion

World Literature promoted the historical development of Chinese comparative literature and literary translation activities in the 20th Century. [9] At that time, *World Literature* became almost the only platform for world literature to appear in China, and played the key role in enlarging the influence of foreign literature in China. As for the limitations of the book, because of the large number of translations published in *World Literature*, the author of the book has not been able to make a detailed evaluation of many translations, and the analysis of the translator's translation process and the discussion of the translated works seem to be not enough. It is difficult for readers to appreciate style of those translated works to a certain extent.

In conclusion, as a monograph on the study of literary relations based on the first-hand historical materials of translation and literature, the rich theoretical perspective and effective research methods of the book have enlightening study for the interaction

between Chinese literature and world literature. This book has made an effective attempt to conduct an in-depth and systematic study of the literature, translation and historical facts that closely related to world literature and cross-cultural communication between China and the west.

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