Debate over André Lefevere’s Theory of “Translation as a Rewriting” in China at the New Century: Retrospection and Reflection

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Abstract. This article revisits the debates over Lefevere’s Theory of “Translation as a Rewriting” in China since the year 2000 from three perspectives: the historical and epistemological background of the Theory, differences between rewriting and translation, the contributions and limitations of the Theory. With thorough retrospection, it states that the disputes concerning the Theory arise from the divergences in scholars’ expectation horizons and academic stances. This study also illustrates that Lefevere’s Theory and traditional translation theories are complementary to each other in explaining the complexity of translation as a whole.

Introduction
It is generally accepted that Lefevere officially proposed his theory of “Translation as a Rewriting” in 1992. His discussion of translation as a rewriting (originally refraction), however, can be traced back to an earlier period. As early as 1982, he made a thorough analysis of the nature and detailed rules of the key notion “refraction”. For him, refraction refers to the adaptation of an original work to a different audience. A writer’s work gains exposure and achieves influence mainly through “misunderstandings and misconceptions”, to use a more neutral term, refractions [1]. In 1985, he changed the notion “refraction” to “rewriting” and further explained the factors that constrain rewriters. In his words, “All rewriting of literature, be it interpretation, criticism, historiography, the putting together of anthologies, or translation, take place under at least one of the constraints of ideology, poetics, universe of discourse and natural language” [2]. As the most radical and obvious form of rewriting, translation operates under all the above four constraints.

Research on Lefevere’s theory of “Translation as a Rewriting” in China started at the beginning of the new century. Since the year 2000, more than 50 relevant articles have been published in China including praises as well as criticism. The main topics of the existing research include its historical and epistemological background, the comparison between rewriting and translation, its contributions and limitations etc. Although related study is deepening, disputes still prevail. To better explore the theoretical significance of Lefevere’s Theory to Chinese translation studies as well as clear connected confusions, we need a thorough retrospection and wise reflection over the past study, as well as the essence of the Theory itself.

The Historical and Epistemological Background of Lefevere’s Theory
Towards the “mistakes” in American translator H. R. Hays’ English translation of German Brecht’s Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder, traditional translation studies will either criticize the inadequacy or misinterpretation of the translation or regret about the difficulty of keeping faithful to the original. Lefevere, however, suggested considering Hay’s translation as a rewriting of the original text, which undoubtedly reflects the manipulation of a certain ideology, poetics and other constraints.

Proposing the theory in the late 1980s, Lefevere is bound to have been influenced by contemporary dominant western critical theories. Around the historical background or theoretical origin of the Theory, Chinese scholars have contributed several articles and offered their own
interpretations. Among the articles, Li Longquan made the most thorough analysis. He summarized the theoretical causes of Lefevere’s Theory as six critical theories, respectively Russian Formalism, Existentialism, Deconstruction, Derrida’s Concept of Différance, Postmodernism and Post Colonialism [3]. Another scholar, however, showed a slightly different opinion: Discarding the vagueness of Structuralism, Rewriting Theory opens the new horizon of cultural turn in Translation Studies with borrowed notions from Russian Formalism and Michel Foucault’s Knowledge Structure Theory” [4].

Although minor differences exist in the two Chinese scholars’ explanation, a consensus can be reached as follows: Lefevere’s Rewriting Theory is under direct influence of cultural studies and post-structuralism. This agreement can be testified by Lefevere’s original works. Based on Said’s argument “All reading is misreading and no one reading is better than other” [5], Lefevere illustrated that any kind of criticism pretend to be objective and try to take on the trappings of the scientific while remaining partisan and subjective [6]. In other words, all interpretations of texts are refractions or rewritings. Borrowing Derrida’s notion of “openness and inter-textuality of all interpretations to text”, Lefevere proposed that translation is a rewriting of an original text and absolute equivalence doesn’t exist [7].

Comparison between Rewriting and Translation
Rewriting refers to a range of processes which can be said to reinterpret, alter or manipulate an original text in some way [8]. The interaction of writing and rewriting is ultimately responsible, not just for the canonization of specific authors or specific works and the rejection of others, but also for the evolution of a given literature [9]. Translation is also regarded as potentially the most influential because it is able to project the image of an author and or those works in another country, lifting that author or the works beyond the boundaries of their culture of origin [10]. Moreover, no one form of rewriting can establish or disestablish, make or break the reputation of a writer or and a work inside the receiving culture [11].

From the above statements, we can summarize Lefevere’s attitude towards translation and rewriting as follows: 1. Translation is a type of rewriting. Besides translation, rewriting can be in other forms, such as review, criticism, and anthology. 2. Translation and other forms of rewriting together shape the image of a certain author or work in a given culture or literary system. 3. All rewritings, including translation, are never innocent but manipulation of rewriters.

As for the similarities and differences between translation and rewriting in the framework of Lefevere’s Rewriting Theory, several Chinese scholars have conducted relevant research. From the perspective of Prototype Theory, Xue Haibin concluded that “It is difficult to clearly distinguish one from the other since both belong to the prototype of creation. With strong family resemblance, they are in a continuum [12]. Stressing similarities, Zhang Zhiqiang regarded translation as a rewriting of a source text and a process of creating a target text with specific intended functions based on a source text [13]. He even suggested naming the course of teaching translation as “Rewriting Course” instead of “Translation Course” [14]. Cao Minglun, however, holds different ideas. To him, “Rewriting is still an action of writing in which rewriters operate within the same language while translation involves in linguistic transfer between two languages” [15]. Cao’s argument is echoed by Huang Dexian who believes that “Not all translations are rewriting of original text since rewriting is only a special characteristic rather than the essence of translation” [16].

From my point of view, we should neither erase similarities of translation with other rewriting forms artificially nor blindly equate translation with rewriting. The distinctiveness of translation is what makes translation a translation. In detail, the unique features of translation listed below should be borne in mind when we are conducting translation studies:

1. Translation and other forms of rewriting project the image of an author or those works in different environments and chronological sequence. Rewritings like film adaptation, anthology and historiography are usually done inside a given literary system and culture while translation functions in a foreign system to foreign audiences. In the chronological order, translation generally
occurs first and earlier than other rewritings since translators are the prophet of the mass just as Goethe claims.

2. The degree of deviation from original work in translation differs from that of other rewriting forms. Compared with other rewritings, translation generally does the least altering over the image of the original work, author and culture though with unavoidable losses and gains in form and content since it is confined to more factors. As translation is a rewriting between two languages and cultures, translators are entitled with less freedom than other rewriters.

The Contribution and Limitation of Lefevere’s Rewriting Theory

Drawing on findings of descriptive study over specific translated facts of literary works in particular historical periods, Lefevere put forward his theory of Translation as a Rewriting. As the main theoretical support of cultural turn in translation studies, the Theory arose from the conviction that “translation studies need to deal with the socio-cultural, ideological and literary constraints which lie behind the production of texts” [17]. Since its entering into China, the Theory has received wide concern and comments from Chinese scholars. Some think highly of it while others doubt it with anxiety. The representative comments can be divided into two directions: contributions and limitations.

Compared with traditional translation theories, Lefevere’s Rewriting Theory is believed to have made innovations and contributions in three aspects according to existing study of Chinese scholars:

1. The Theory better illustrates the complexity of translation and hence broadens the scope of Translation Studies. Just as Jiao Pengshuai comments, “Borrowing notions from literary theories, Rewriting Theory stresses the outer factors that lead to textual variation in the translation process. Extending the research perspective to multiple social forces that influence the action of translation, the Theory opens a broader horizon” [18]. Translation is used to be regarded as the process of linguistic and semiotic transmission while Lefevere treats translation as a rewriting in cultural communication and construction. Translation is not only restricted to linguistic problems in textual representation but also extra-linguistic factors in textual selection and acceptance. The scope of Translation Studies is hence broadened from textual level of traditional translation theories to wider cultural vision [19].

2. The proposal of the theory signals the turn of Translation Studies from prescriptive to descriptive research [20]. Traditional translation studies are mainly prescriptive and source-oriented, focusing on ways to achieve equivalence between source and target text. Descriptive translation studies are more target-oriented, aiming to find out what is translated and why translation is done this way rather than that way. Translation, regardless of its degree of equivalence to source text, is taken as translated facts and research object of descriptive translation studies. Regarding translation as rewriting and manipulation on original text, Lefevere’s Theory breaks the stereotyped thinking that treats source text as the only yardstick to appraise translation [21].

3. The Theory has a stronger explanatory force to special translation facts in translation history. In the view of Lefevere, translations once labeled as “unfaithful” are deemed as valuable in their own specific ways. Lefevere’s Theory lays more stress on the explanation of existing translation facts from extra-linguistic factors than evaluation on the degree of equivalence between source and target text. It can also help explain why retranslations multiply both in western and Chinese history, why translators unavoidably bear the notorious fame of “betrayer”. Admitting the values of different forms of translation, Rewriting Theory counteracts the source text-centered tendency of traditional translation studies in some degree [22].

In spite of the above generally-accepted merits, Lefevere’s Theory has also aroused Chinese scholars’ disputes and quarrels on its limitations and demerits. The debate mainly touches on three issues in the below:

1. Whether the Theory gives translators more freedom and highlights their subjectivity?

Some believe that Lefevere’s Rewriting Theory emancipates translators from traditional bondages and thus improves their status and subjectivity. For example, He Shaobin proposed that
the manipulation power entitiled by Rewriting Theory completely changes translators’ image as imitator of author since translators are either blamed as betrayers or remain invisible from traditional point of view” [23]. However, the voices of disapproval are also strong. For instance, Zhao Yanchun insisted that Rewriting Theory shows the whiff of placing the unimportant before the important [24]. Zhao’s argument is echoed by Li Longquan. From Li’s view, “Rewriting Theory superficially seems to have bestowed translators with full freedom and liberated them from the traditional enslavement of ‘Faithfulness’” [25]. He further commented that “In reality, translators’ ideology is totally dissolved in dominant ideology and poetological currents. Translators’ subjective factors like independent personality, will and dignity totally disappear, what readers see is an image of obedient, flattering rewriter without self-contained soul or spirit” [26]. As far as I’m concerned, I agree with the notion that Lefevere’s Theory neglect or overlook translators’ counter ability against the constraints of dominant ideology and poetics.

2. Whether the Theory is beneficiary to the disciplinary independence of Translation Studies?

Although it is generally accepted among Chinese scholars that Lefevere’s Rewriting Theory widens the range of Translation Studies, dispute exists on whether it contributes to strengthening the independent status of the discipline. With Rewriting Theory as immediate theoretical basis, the cultural turn of translation studies initiated by Lefevere and Bassnett solidifies the role of translation studies as an independent discipline [27]. Li Longquan, however, is not optimistic but worried about the Theory’s influence on the discipline. In his words, “The research paradigm of cultural turn stressing culture and neglecting text put translation studies under the crisis of being superseded by cultural studies. Going in that way, Translation studies will lose its disciplinary independence” [28]. From the perspective of translation ontology, Zhao Yanchun proposed a similar view that “Taking the road of phenomena description, Rewriting Theory goes to the extreme of denying the basic foundation of translation studies under the impacts of post structuralism” [29]. In my opinion, taking into account ideology, poetics and patronage that restrains translation won’t blur the independent disciplinary status of Translation Studies as long as we researchers take an integrated approach as Snell-Hornby proposed.

3. Whether the Theory causes confusion to translation practice?

As for whether Lefevere’s Rewriting Theory produces negative effects on translation practice, there exist three different dispositions. Some treats it positively. Taking hints from Lefevere’s Rewriting Theory, several scholars admit the values of the Theory in guiding translation practice. The representative statements include: “In the translation between English and Chinese, rewriting is the nature of translation not only in the translation of literary texts, but also that of non literary texts due to the great differences existing in both languages and cultures” [30]; “Rewriting is a common mode of translating Chinese literature for global communication throughout the translation history since the culture-constructing value produced by this mode is interlinked with the desire of Chinese literature to go out” [31]. Others, however, hold a negative stance. They believe that the Theory might lead to nihilism of standards in translation practice. The overemphasis of the Theory on extra-linguistic factors that confine translation is not appropriate since those factors influence almost all human activities. The factors that decide a translation as translation are linguistic ones in nature. In addition, there are also views that consider Rewriting Theory as a theory of literature and literary translation instead of a practical translation theory. For instance, Huang Dexian states that “Lefevere’s Rewriting Theory is only a description over finished translated products with the purpose of explaining the factors that restricts the reception of foreign literature. It doesn’t tell people to rewrite original text” [32]. At this point, I comply with Huang’s view. Those who worry about the negative influence of Lefevere’s Theory in translation practice might have misinterpretations or misunderstanding about the Theory itself.

Summary

Through the above comprehensive retrospection over the debates concerning Lefevere’s Rewriting Theory, we may find an important question for further reflection: Why do Chinese scholars differ so contrastively in attitudes towards the Theory? Susan Bassnett’s warning against isolated research
can help explain this phenomenon. In the view of Bassnett, Translation Studies should cover four general categories, respectively history of translation, translation in the target culture, translation and linguistics, translation and poetics. She suggested that “It is important for the student of translation to be mindful of the four general categories, even while investigating one specific area of interest, in order to avoid fragmentation” [33]. The most important reason of the quarrels over Lefevere’s Theory lies in the divergences in scholars’ expectation horizons and academic stances. To be more specific, they fail to notice that Lefevere’s Rewriting Theory and Traditional translation theories like “Faithfulness” are complementary to each other in explaining the complexity of translation as a whole. Moreover, they belong to different paradigms of Translation Studies: linguistic turn and cultural turn. With different focuses, they see translation in a different way. Scholars need to bear in mind the incommensurability as well as the complementarity of different paradigms.

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