Contextualized Study of Indirect Translation in China: 1898–1936

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Abstract. Indirect translation is a significant phenomenon in China from 1898 to 1936. A substantial number of literary works were indirectly imported via a third intermediate language in this period. The article attempts to do a contextualized research into this phenomenon. The study of the socio-cultural contexts will be based on Gideon Toury’s norm theory and Andre Lefevere’s manipulation theory, which conceptualize indirect translation as a norm-governed practice, and perceive translation as rewriting which reflects manipulation by ideology and poetics. Then an effort is made to explain the reasons behind the selection of particular text types to be translated, the adoption of indirect translation and the choice of certain mediating languages over others.

Introduction

As opposed to direct translation, when a source text is translated into the target text without using a mediating language as medium, indirect translation, also referred to as intermediate translation, mediated translation, retranslation or secondhand translation, is when a text is not translated directly from an original source text, but via an intermediate translation in another language (see Shuttleworth and Cowie 2004:76). As a long-standing translation phenomenon, indirect translation can be dated back to as early as ancient Rome in the West, when the Hebrew Bible was translated indirectly by means of mediating languages (i.e. Greek, Latin, etc.) into Latin, English, German, etc (see Xie 2009). In Ancient China’s Buddhist scriptures translation starting from Han Dynasty, Hu languages (Hu referring to the Central Asian kingdoms bordering West China) were used as intermediate languages in indirect translation into Chinese (see Wang 2004, Chen 1989, Meng and Li 2005).

The indirect approach to translation is mostly discouraged in history. It is shunned like some kind of a disease (Toury 2001:129), since two separate transfers (source language → mediating language → target language) inevitably result in increased discrepancy between the source and target texts. As Levý (2011:171) puts it: “Dependence on a translation into another language is most often brought to our attention by errors of comprehension or deviations from the source which are difficult to explain as direct translation [...]”. The prescriptive approach, dominant in traditional translation studies, is based on source-oriented linguistic comparison. It values fidelity and linguistic equivalence, and holds indirect translation in contempt. With a third language involved, indirect translation presumably results in further deviation from the original source text. Hence the widespread negative attitudes toward indirect translation among the general public, despite “ample evidence throughout history of successful and highly esteemed indirect translations, as well as of [...] failed and inadequate direct translations [...]” (Ringmar 2007: 10).

As a result, indirect translation is mentioned only in passing in the majority of translation history studies. This is also true of China, where translation criticism is especially application-oriented, and translators hold “faithfulness, expressiveness, elegance” as the supreme law. Though there have been discussions about reasons behind indirect translation in particular historical periods, as well as about its advantages and disadvantages (see Wang 2004, She and Chen 2004, Chen 2005, Wang 2008, Li 2012), theoretical and systematic researches on the topic are still lacking. However, like everything in and about translation, indirect translation is norm-governed too (Toury 2001: 129). Rather than merely a linguistic transfer from source text to target text, it is also a type of social activity inseparable
from particular socio-cultures. Translators function not in a vacuum, but “in a given culture at a given time” (Lefevere 2010: 14). By adopting a descriptive method of contextualization, which is concerned with the interactions between translation and culture rather than with the source text only, we are able to put indirect translation back into the historical, social and cultural context in which they are produced, and recognize various factors behind the literary translation itself.

**Indirect Translation and the Socio-cultural Context before the May 4th Movement (1898-1918)**

**Historical Background**

The publication of Tianyan Lun (On Evolution) translated by Yan Fu in 1898, which initiated the introduction of Western culture to China, along with translation of the masterpiece La Dame aux camellias by Lin Shu the next year, is generally considered (see Chen 1989, Wang 1997, Guo 1998, Meng and Li 2005) to be the beginning of literary translation in China.

The late 19th Century and early 20th Century is a remarkable period in China’s translation history, when the nation encountered dramatic upheavals and unprecedented external threats. The defeat of Opium War was a wake-up call for Chinese intellectuals, which broke their illusion of China as a powerful empire, and opened their eyes to advanced weapons and technology of the West. It was argued that the only way to guard against the West is to learn western technologies. Hence the Self-strengthening Movement initiated by Qing government. Later in 1895, China’s defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War sent another shock wave across China, demonstrating what China badly needed were not only advancements in technology and military, but social reforms (see Xu 2008, Wang 1997). As a consequence, the beginning of the 20th century saw unprecedented scale of Western learning, which were manifested in the substantial number of translated Western works.

**Manipulation of Ideology and Poetics**

Translation is interpreted by Lefevere (2010) as rewriting of the original text, which reflect a certain ideology (the dominant concept of what society should be) and a poetics (the dominant concept of what literature should be) and “as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way.” There is a double control factor of the literary system: the professionals inside it, and the patronage operating outside it. Liang Qichao, a prominent man of letters, a critic and a translator, is the most influential professional in this period. As the advocate of “Fiction Revolution”, he started the first Chinese fiction magazine Xin Xiaoshuo (New Fiction). In the first issue of the magazine, Liang declared that “Rejuvenation of a nation starts from renewal of its fiction.”(Liang 1989:1). This declaration manifests Lefevere’s notion (2010:26-7) that the functional component of a poetics is closely tied to ideological influences from outside literature. The component is also “influential in the selection of themes that must be relevant to the social system if the work of literature is to be noticed at all” (ibid.). Liang is an ardent proponent of political novels, claiming that they have been the greatest contributor to political progress in western countries and Japan. Besides political fictions, other literary genres such as science fictions and detective fictions were also translated out of ideological considerations. For example, science fictions might help popularize science and eliminate superstition; and detective fictions could be used as a weapon to attack social corruption. (see Wang 1997, Guo 1998).

**The Preliminary Norms**

Toury (2001:56-8) sees three kinds of norms operating at different stages of the translation process. The “preliminary norms”, which involve factors governing translation policy, including the choice of the text for translation and the directness of translation, is most relevant to our discussion of indirect translation. The selection of source text and the choice of mediating language are two major elements in the discussion.
Selection of Source Texts. Chinese intellectuals were led by crises at the turn of the century to the realization that the self-improvement of China should be based on extensive leaning from the West. This awareness was reflected in the unprecedented scale of Western works translation in China. For example, the number of books translated between 1900 and 1911 was twice that of the previous 90 years (Xiong 1994: 33-4). There was also a dramatic increase in the translation of humanities and social sciences, including literature, history, philosophy, economics, law, etc. When it comes to literature, Liang Qichao had successfully broken down the prejudice against fiction, paving the way for an upsurge of fiction translation. Political novels, detective novels and science fiction were the most important categories of translated fiction in this period. In the late 1910s there were also the translation of love stories and romances. (see Xiong 1994, Wang 1997, Guo 1998).

The Mediating Language. The choice of the major mediating language, Japanese, is inseparable from cultural context at that point. Indirect translations “highlight the power relations between culture/languages, in so far that the mediating language is, as a rule, a dominant language whereas the target language is dominated” (Ringmar 2007: 10). And in this case, it’s more the cultures than the languages. Thanks to the Meiji Reform beginning from 1868, Japan had accomplished its industrial, military and economic rise, emerging triumphant from the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the war with Russia in 1905. Despite their bitter feelings, the Chinese intellectuals viewed it as a shortcut to follow the steps of this neighboring country, who had learned from the West far quicker and better than them (see Xu 2008, Wang 1997).

Another contributing factor is the linguistic affiliation between the two languages, with a significant proportion of written Japanese words borrowed in the form of Chinese characters. For Chinese scholars, it would result in saved time and energy in learning Japanese. That’s why Liao Qichao (1989: 230), the eminent scholar, political activist and representative of professionals, argued that translating Western works indirectly from Japanese could “yield twice the result with half the effort”.

Indirect Translation and the Socio-cultural Context after the May 4th Movement (1919-1936)

Historical Background

The failure of the Chinese Republic, founded in 1912, to resolve China’s external crises and internal instability, led to widespread disillusionment with traditional Chinese culture. Endeavor merely on the material and institutional level, intellectuals realized, would never suffice to salvage the nation without a radical transformation of people’s mentality. Based on this awareness is their calling for the creation of a fresh Chinese culture based on western standards, especially democracy and science. (see Xu 2008, Qian, L et al. 1998).

The New Culture Movement beginning in 1915, as part of May 4th Movement period, is a milestone in the history of China, which with its literary translation boom signified the modern transformation of Chinese culture and society, as well as the renewal of Chinese literature. The progress was interrupted by the Japanese invasion into China in 1937, when a wartime literature emerged in response to the call of the times to fight against the invaders. (ibid.)

Manipulation of Ideology and Poetics

The correlation between translation and socio-culture can be reflected in the translational dispute between two of the most influential societies—Literary Research Society and Creation Society. These two societies are composed of leading critics, reviewers and translators. Meanwhile, they are also institutions regulating important literary journals. According to Lefevere’s categorization (2010: 14, 15), they assumed the dual role of professionals and patronages. In systems with differentiated patronage (when the ideological, the economic and the status components are dispensed by different patrons), “different critical schools will try to elaborate different canons of their own, and each of
these schools will try to establish its own canon as the only ‘real’ one, meaning the one corresponding to its poetics, its ideology, or both” (2010:29) The Creation Society, committed to “art for art’s sake”, advocated individualized self-expression, and emphasized the intrinsic artistic values of translated works. The more utilitarian Literary Research Society viewed literature and art as a means to mirror reality and serve society. They demonstrated a bias towards realistic works, especially those of the Soviet/Russia and of other “oppressed nations”. (see Chen 1989, Wang 1997, Guo 1998, Meng and Li 2005). So what appeared to be a debate over text types to translate actually reflected their ideological or literary preference, especially their concepts of what literature should be.

The Preliminary Norms

Direct Translation by Creation Society and Indirect Translation by Literary Research Society. The Creation Society were actively engaged in translating masterpieces of various genres like romanticism, symbolism, futurism, and expressionism, etc., and showed a preference for Romanticism. Classics by prominent literary figures, such as Byron, Shelley, Rousseau, Goethe, Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde, accounted for a large proportion (see Guo 1998). The prevalence of direct translation may be attributed to dominance of the source languages or existence of the adequacy norm for high-prestige literature (Ringmar 2007:1).

During the middle and late phase of May 4th Movement period, translation of realistic literature grew into the mainstream, in which translation of Russian literature and literature of “oppressed nations” in Eastern and Northern Europe gained momentum. With a resemblance between their national circumstances and social realities, these nations shared a tragic fate with China. Compared to the self-oriented Romantic literature, their literary works show an orientation towards nation and people. All this struck a chord with Chinese intellectuals who were concerned about their homeland and felt the urgent need to salvage the country from oppression. Indirect translation was prevailing among translators from the Literary Research Society (see Xu 2008, Qian, L et al. 1998, Wang 1997, Guo 1998).

The Indirectness of Translation and the Mediating Languages. As is pointed out by Ringmar (2007:5), indirect translation might, hypothetically, “correlate with e.g. considerable distance linguistically and/or geographically and limited and sporadic (literary) contact between the source and target culture.” The most obvious reason behind indirect translation in this period, however, is shortage of competent translators and lack of knowledge of the source language. This lack can be absolute (when literally no translator knows the SL), as in the case of Central, Eastern and Northern European nations, or relative (when no available translator knows the SL), as in the case of Russia. The dominant mediating languages in this period are English and German (Li 2012:113), which seem to be “preferred because of the prestige of the mediating language” (Ringmar 2007:6). What is noteworthy is the use of Esperanto as mediating language, which was popular with some translators/writers of the Literary Research Society. (see Qian, L et al. 1998).

Conclusion

Indirect translation is a common practice throughout translation history around the world. Translators turn to this approach for various reasons: scarcity of source texts, lack of competence in the source language, prestige of the mediating text, intention to circumvent difficulties in source texts, consideration of translation quality, or a wish to save time and energy, etc. The end product can be exalted, generally accepted or dismissed as worthless. Despite its prevalence, indirect translation has not received due attention and scholarly interest. On the contrary, it has been met with negative attitudes among the general public, such as suspicion and contempt. However, indirect translation, like any other translation activities, is subject to the socio-cultural conditions, especially the manipulation of ideology and poetics in particular literary systems. An in-depth and systematic survey
of this phenomenon is bound to provide us with a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of translation, as well as a broader perspective on its interaction with other cultural and social factors.

The article is an attempt to survey indirect translation in China from 1989 to 1936, by drawing on Toury’s norm theory and Lefevere’s manipulation theory. Contextualizing the translation phenomenon in particular socio-cultural conditions enables us to uncover the forces behind selection of texts for translation, adoption of indirect translation approach, and choice of mediating languages. It also shed some light on the significant role of professionals (Liang Qichao in the first period, Creation Society and Literary Research Society in the second phase).

The scope of the study may be extended to include other factors in translation. For example, initial and operational norms, acceptability and adequacy, foreignizing and domesticating, the position of source text, mediating text and target text in their respective literary systems, the transition from indirect translation to direct translation and its conditions, the joint influence of source culture and mediating culture upon target culture, etc. These can be the subjects of future researches. Translation is a complex phenomenon, which makes it fascinating.

References


