The Interpretability Power & Discourse Theory from the Perspective of the Translation of Western Science and Technology at the End of the Ming Dynasty and the Beginning of the Qing Dynasty

Rui-Sheng WANG
Chifeng University, Chifeng, China

Keywords: Interpretability, Power & Discourse, Translation, Science and Technology

Abstract. With the help of Michel Foucault’s power and discourse theory, this thesis makes a detailed analysis of the translation of Western science and technology at the end of the Ming dynasty from the perspectives including the power of patronage and the power of the translators. The research result shows that power and discourse theory has a clear interpretability for the translation of Western science and technology at the end of the Ming dynasty.

1. Introduction

Power and discourse theory (shortened as P & D theory in the following part) was proposed by Michel Foucault, a famous French historian and philosopher, in the 1970s. In Foucault’s opinion, power is a thing that has manipulating and controlling force to peoples’ ideologies and acts. Power exists wherever discourse appears and is the controlling force of discourse. Discourse is the manifestation of power and all power is realized by discourse. Foucault’s P & D theory has made quite a difference to the cultural study of the western world, just as a Western scholar once said, “because of the interdisciplinary feature of this theory, any academic discipline can get some enlightenment from him.” (Xu Ben, 1996:156)

In the 1970s, some translation researchers began to change the translation study in a more macro environment including society and culture. Foucault’s power and discourse theory started to exercise its influence upon translation studies. In this thesis, I will make an interpretation on the translation of Western science and technology at the end of the Ming dynasty which have been affected by Foucault's P & D theory.

2. Translation of Western Science and Technology at the End of the Ming Dynasty

In the seventeenth century, at the end of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), China became backward scientifically under the domination of feudalism while many European countries became more powerful in science and technology that culminated in the Industrial Revolution. Meanwhile, one of China’s neighboring countries and a group of nobles of Man nationality suddenly rose against the Dynasty and threatened its security. All these encouraged the literati and officials who hoped that China would become rich and powerful too. They decided to learn the scientific and technological advancement from the West. Therefore, China saw the second wave of translation which lasted for nearly two hundred years from the end of the Ming dynasty to the beginning of the Qing dynasty. This translation movement was characterized by the introduction of Western scientific and technological advancements. As Liang Qichao once commented, “The introduction of the European calendar and arithmetic into China in the late Ming Dynasty was a key event in Chinese academic history.”(Feng Tianyu, 2008)

3. The Power of the Patronage

In the sixteenth century, some European countries entered into the period of capitalist primitive accumulation. As the advance force of bourgeois, colonists began their oversea pillage. According to Ma Zuyi, “The missionaries of Jesus came to China and engaged in religious propaganda activities when the colonists were robbing the seaside areas of China.” (1998: 262) When the
missionaries were to spread the religion into inland of China, they found they were impeded by the strong traditional Chinese culture. In order to make their preaching successfully, the missionaries changed their traditional strategy and began to transmit Western science and technology into China and thus started the second translation peak in Chinese history.

Since China was still possess a strong culture position at the end of the Ming dynasty and the beginning of the Qing dynasty, the translation of Western science and technology should be supported by some patronages. In feudal Chinese society, the most powerful patronage is the emperor and the literati.

According historical records, during the end of the Mind dynasty and the beginning of the Qing dynasty, most of the emperors except one emperor of the Qing dynasty titled Yongzheng (1678-1735), were tolerant to the European missionaries and their translation activities, which was the essential condition for the missionaries to live in China. One example is Kangxi(1661-1722), an emperor in the Qing dynasty, who not only encouraged the missionaries to translate and introduce Western science into China but also organized them to map maps and study The Books of Changes in order to make full use of their advantages.

Some Chinese literati helped the foreign missionaries to study Chinese. Xu Zongduo says in his book titled An Introduction to Christian Propaganda History in China, Xu Guangqi made much help to the missionaries’ language study. He employed famous professors for the missionaries, one of whom even declined to attend social activities and concentrated himself on religion and Latin study so as to help the missionaries. (Ma Zuyi, 1998: 303)

Meanwhile, some Chinese literati also worked as assistants to the missionaries’ translation, such as writing records, polish, introductions and publishing. A lot of translation works in this time were finished with the cooperation between Chinese literati and the foreign missionaries. The most famous Chinese literati include Xu Guangqi and Li Zhizao.

Just as Ma Zuyi says, although the missionaries have made great contribution to the exchange of Chinese and Western cultures, they could not have succeeded without the support and cooperation of Chinese emperors and literati.

4. The Power of the Translator

The translator of the second translation peak includes two parties: one is the foreign missionaries and the other is the Chinese literati, who have made full use of their power as translators in the process of translation.

4.1 The Translator’s Power in Choosing the ST

For the foreign missionaries, their real purpose was not to transmit Western science and technology, but to transmit Catholicism into China. After studying Chinese culture in advance, they realized that there existed basic conceptual divergence between Christianity and Confucianism and Taoism doctrines. They also knew that it was unrealistic for the Chinese scholars and officials to accept other beliefs without doubt and questions. In order to make their religion propaganda successfully in China, they selected to translate some Western works on sciences and technologies into Chinese, which was just a strategy for their religious propaganda. But the majority of their translation works were related to religion. It is estimated that during the 200 years of their living in China, the foreign missionaries translated about 437 kinds of books into Chinese, among which, 251 kinds were religious books, taking up 57% of the whole, 131 kinds were about natural sciences, or comprising 30% of the whole and 55 kinds about humanities, taking 13% of the whole. (Guo Yanli, 1998: 5)

Let’s take Matteo Ricci for example: during his living in Beijing, he communicated with the scholars, officials, attracting them with advanced Western art and teaching them natural science. In 1606 he began to translate Geometric Elements, the 15-volume classics he took from Italy, and finished the first six volumes, which were published with the title The Principles of Geometry in 1608. When Xu Guangqi urged him to continue to translate the remaining nine volumes, Ricci refused “as he was dedicating himself on preaching and wasn’t concentrated himself on the
translation of science works.” (Li Nanqiu, 2006: 236) Ricci’s real purpose can be seen from one report he wrote to Roman on May 10, 1605, in which he said: “now we’d better use mathematics to attract and ingratiate the Chinese.” (Ma Zuyi, 1998: 277)

As far as the Chinese translators to be concerned, they also made full use of their power as a Chinese in choosing the ST. As the literati of feudal China, they had a deep affection to China and became conscious of the backwardness of China in comparison with the western countries. In order to keep up with the western countries, they realized China should learn science and technology from them. After knowing that the foreign missionaries could transmit Western advanced science and technology into China, some literati began to make friend with them and started their translation cause with the help of the foreign missionaries.

Let me take Li Zhizao for instance, who made great contribution to the science and technology translation. Although he was also converted into Christianity in 1610, “his real purpose to follow Matteo Ricci is not religion belief, but to learn scientific knowledge”. (Li Wenge, 2000: 56) From 1583 to 1640, Li reviewed nearly 50 books translated by the missionaries and made deletion, polish or introductions to these books. Just as Chen Xunci says “He (Li) spent the second half of his life on translating books, writing books and transmitting Western science and technology.” (Ma Zuyi, 1998: 269) Li’s translation works were not only large in number but also had very good quality.

4.2 The Translator’s Power in Choosing Translation Strategies and Skills

Facing the strong traditional Chinese culture, the missionaries realized only by adopting Christianity to Confucianism could Christianity be accepted by the Chinese, which means Christianity must be in the first place adhered to while they couldn’t contradict with Confucianism as well. They adopted three rules in their translation, namely,

The contents in Bible which are not in accordance with Confucianism should not be translated; the contents which are in accordance with Confucianism should not be deleted in order for them to be accepted more easily and amplification or abridgement could be used in translating to change some doctrines, making them less contradictory with Confucianism. (Sun Xuhui, 2006: 22)

From these rules we can easily see that they adopted domestication strategy in the translation.

For instance, Julius Aleni, an Italian missionary, deleted in his translation version the contents concerning Jesus’ saying about following him would cause estrangement among family members as he “knew that clans and families were taken as a holy thing in Confucianism and the translation of Jesus’ words would arouse misunderstanding, let along being accepted”, (ibid.) He thus translated the sentence ‘If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers, and sisters, and his own life also, he couldn’t be my disciple’ into ‘若欲亲就我，而不谢父母妻子及轻生命者，非吾徒也。’ Aleni softened the word ‘hate’ and changed it into ‘谢’, instead of using ‘仇恨’, ‘恼恨’ etc. making the sentence more acceptable to the Chinese readers. Besides, when he translated Jesus’ saying in Jerusalem against his parents’ will, Alein added a sentence ‘自后有八年家居纳杂勒郡，孝敬父母，若瑟以立人世孝敬之表。’, which didn’t not exist in Bible but was added in his translation, indicating that violated Jesus’ demanding his disciples giving up the love of family in order to run after the love of God, it is in accordance with filial piety advocated by Confucianism. (Xia Yuan, 2005)

The Chinese translators also powerfully adopted domestication translation strategy in their translation process. For example, when Xu Guangqi presided to revise the calendar, he didn’t mechanically follow the translation of Western calendar text provided by the missionaries. Xu thought the task to develop calendar is to correctly reflect the running rules of the sun, the moon, and the five planets. In the calendar translation process, he paid more attention on inspection and measurement and “measures the sun in the day and the stars at night” in person although he is in his advanced age.
5. Conclusion

In sum, the second translation climax in China was a period of contestation between two groups of power. In order to preach Christianity into China, the European missionaries changed preaching into translating science and technology, but quite out of their expectations, they became the inter-mediators of the communication between China and the western countries, and played a positive role in transmitting Western advanced science and technology in China. For the purpose of learning advanced science and technology from the foreign missionaries, some Chinese translators voluntarily converted into Christianities, such as Xu Guangqi and Li Zhizao. But they didn’t concentrate themselves on preaching, on the contrary, they spent most of their time and energy on translation causes. They proposed such translation principles as Comprehend and Beyond, by which they asserted if China wanted to beyond the western countries, we must first comprehend Western science and technology, which was based on the work of translation.

References