

## Dong Leshan: A Thinker-Translator

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### Abstract

The late Mr. Dong Leshan is a well-renowned translator in China. Most of his translated works, like *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, *Red Star over China*, *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America 1932-1972*, and *1984* enjoys a great reputation. This paper reviews and analyzes Dong Leshan's translation achievements, characteristics and ideas, maintaining that the above mentioned aspects of him make him a thinker-translator.

**Key words:** Dong Leshan; Translator; Characteristics

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### INTRODUCTION

Translator studies are one important aspect of translation studies. Mr. Wang Zuoliang (1989, p.5) once pointed out, "in translation history studies we should highlight and feature certain important translators". Also Douglas Robinson (1991) proposed "translator's turn" and the Spanish scholar Anthony Pym (1998, xi) maintained a focus on translator, the person in translation history study. The late Mr. Dong Leshan is a famous Chinese translator. He translated and co-translated *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, *Red Star over China*, *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America 1932-1972*, and *1984*. His translations, "threaded with human

enlightenment responsibilities" (Lin, 2000), are believed to have deafening impact upon the circle of Chinese scholars, thus enjoying great popularity and reputation in China and "distinguishing him as a thinker-translator" (Pang, 2002). Moreover, Dong Leshan is also established in translation theory. His translation practices and thoughts establish him as a thinker-translator.

## 1. DONG'S TRANSLATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS

### 1.1 Achievements in the First Phase

Dong Leshan was born in Ningbo, Zhejiang province, on Dec. 14, 1924 and died in Beijing on January 16, 1999, a representative figure in the new generation of translators. The famous translator Feng Yidai once remarked (1987): "Leshan was much praised among peers, for he was insightful in understanding the origin and excellent in translations, the result of which cannot be accomplished in one day."

Mr. Dong's translation career can be conveniently classified into two phases. The first phase starts from the 1940s to 1970s, his middle age, and the second from the year 1979, when he re-translated Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China*, to the year 1999, these 20 years being his prime time in translation career. Dong Leshan started translating in college. For instance in 1945 he translated John Steinbeck's *Pearl*, and got published in a magazine in Shanghai. After graduation, he was engaged in news translation, working in Xinhua News Agency. He was knowledgeable and efficient, being able to translate seven to eight hundred words every hour in contrast to the speed of three to four hundred words of an average translator. Also Dong compiled a pamphlet of news translating, which laid a foundation for foreign word translation standardization. He was generally acknowledged as a pioneer in news translation in China. During his years

working as a news translator, he volunteered to do literary translation and his first translated book—a novel by the then Czech president got published by the People's Publishing House.

In 1957, he was labeled as a “Rightist”. Despite that, he was relentless in his pursuits. The Chinese version of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* by William L. Shirer, a famed foreign correspondent and historian was attributed mainly to him. This worldwide best-seller, acclaimed as the definitive book on Nazi Germany, was discovered by Dong and he immediately took up translating it. According to his co-worker, Li Shenzi,

we both spent a month translating 20 thousand words, and then proofread each other's work. As we were not allowed to finish the remaining part of the book, the final translation was full of discrepancies. It was Dong who took the trouble to revise it. (2001, p.386)

The book was restricted to partial circulation, but was being republished during the “Cultural Revolution” and was widely popular. In 1971, Dong offered to re-edit the book for its third time publishing.

In the 1970s Dong participated in editing the Chinese version of *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America 1932-1972*, a comprehensive historical account of America at that time by William Manchester. These early experiences in translating historical works laid a foundation for his preference for works that seek truth and reflect upon historical events. In 1978 the SDX Joint Publishing Company invited him to translate Lois Wheeler Snow's *I Love China*, a pamphlet about how Edgar Snow struggled in his final days and also Snow's masterpiece *Red Star over China*.

## 1.2 Achievements in the Second Phase

This second phase consists of the remaining twenty years in Dong's life, in which he reached a climax in translation career. He was in his 60s, working in Institute of American Studies in Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and finally enjoyed the freedom of translating what he chose. The year 1979 when he was invited to translate Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China* was the turning point. Later on he translated *Darkness at Noon* by the Hungarian writer Arthur Koestler and George Orwell's *1984*.

From Edgar Snow to George Orwell, it was not a random choice of the translator, not an abrupt change of thoughts, but the pilgrimage of a wise man who was always concerned with the destiny of the Chinese nation and the human kind. (Wu, 1999)

The reason for Dong chose to translate *Is Paris Burning* in 2002 was due to his World War II complex. In his opinion, (2001, p.46) “of all the numerous books about World War II, I find two most intoxicating. One is *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*; the other is *Paris Burning*? So as early as in 1995, he translated some chapters of the book, which was published in the

periodical World Literature, hoping to provide writing technique reference for China's reportage.

The decision to translate *The Humanist Tradition in the West* by Alan Bullock, a famous British historian, was made the minute he found the original book was in the mailing book catalogue from U.S. Dong once said (2001, p.59), “What on earth is western humanism? In what way it is connected with the China humanist spirit which is under heated discussion among Chinese intellectuals? I am really curious about these questions?” The Chinese translation was published in 2003, becoming a basic reader for Chinese people to understand mainstream western intellectual history.

In the same year, *The Trial of Socrates* was translated by Dong Leshan and published by SDX Joint Publishing Company. The reason why Dong translated the book was two folded. First, the writer was the famous left-wing American veteran newsman I.F. Stone, who was much admired by Dong for his professional integrity. Second, the original book was a miracle in the publishing industry at that time because of its interesting contents despite the serious topic.

Dong also translated and co-translated *Classics*, a popular reader of western cultural tradition by Mary Beard and John Handerson, *George Orwell's Collected Essays*, *The Last Temptation of Christ* by a Greek writer N. Kazantzakis. Besides these serious writings, he translated foreign literary works for a change. They include *Empire of the Sun* by J. G. Ballard, *The Ghost Writer* by American writer Philip Roth, *Breakfast of Champions and Jailbird* by American writer Kurt Vonnegut. Because of his achievements, in 1994, he was honored “Award for Sino-American Literary Exchange Award” together with four other famous scholars in translation.

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## 2. DONG'S TRANSLATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

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### 2.1 Characteristics in the First Phase

In this first phase, Dong did translation out of necessity and passion, as was illustrated above. His activities are deeply influenced by ideology. As Andre Lefevere (1992, p.14) maintains, ideology and poetics are the two factors that constrain translation. Publishing houses are usually the patronage of translators, and the mainstream publishing houses conform to mainstream ideologies. Political ideologies determine subject selection and plans of publishing houses. And the practices of publishing houses must be in line with the policies of related national departments Translators, which are hired by publishing houses, thus have to comply with the arrangements of publishing houses and be censored in their translations. Their payments are also subject to policies and publishing houses. Their basic rights of work payment and right to

authorship sometimes can not always be guaranteed due to the one-sided contract signed with publishing houses.

When Dong translated his first book for People's Literature Publishing House, he was not allowed to finish the whole book because the "Anti-Rightists Campaign" in 1957 broke out. Being labeled as a "Rightist", he was asked to return to the original book, hand in the translation which was only half done and send back some of the payment. When the book was finally published in 1958, Dong's name was not printed in the translated book. Luckily, a pseudo name "Maiya" was used due to the efforts of a friend.

The first book in which Dong Leshan's real name can be seen was the Chinese translation of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. It was Dong who recommended the original book for the publishing house to translate. And he planned to finish this thick book in collaboration with two colleagues. But the publishing house hired six more to finish the work, only to delay the translating process at last.

During the 1960s, translator right to authorship was deeply under the influence of ideology. As was observed (2007, p.45), "The mainstream ideology at that time was in favor of collectivist heroism and against individualist heroism. So the practice of individual translator authorship was rare." Because there are nine translators in the first translated version of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, it was problematic in translator authorship. The solution was three pseudo names made from the nine names. Dong Leshan's name was finally printed in the 1973 edition of the translation as a reward for his re-editing the translation free of charge. When Dong translated *Red Star over China*, there was no forced co-translation. But his translation was still subject to editorial revision. The publisher Shen Changwen recalled,

I dare not to change a single word of Dong's translation, but had to delete from time to time, some contents of the original. I know what I deleted are often what Dong felt proud of. But Dong had to consent to my revision. (Shen, 2001, p.393)

It was in the year of 1979, after the "Cultural Revolution", but the payment is still meager, four yuan for one thousand words.

## 2.2 Characteristics in the Second Phase

From the above translated works, we can see clearly Dong's preference for works about World War II and works by journalists. This inclination reveals a translator's spirit and ambition, his responsibility for the Chinese people to understand socialism, humanitarian spirit, political totalitarianism and political terror from the angle of world, culture and history. And he was therefore most praised by peers and readers.

Translator Li Wenjun (2001, p.392) commented, "Dong saw through many social problems in China. He tried his best to do something about them, like writing essays, translating books, hoping to illuminate public thinking,

to help people see things more clearly." Translator Zi Zhongjun (2001, p.398) summarized: "His translation choices, his sense of destiny and concern for history is closely tangled. Every time he translates it is purposeful and consistent, which is humanitarian spirit." Dong's son, Dong Yibo speaks for his father (2001, p.10): "What he did was never out of a sudden impulse, nor for reputation, but the pilgrimage of a patriotic intellectual who experienced wars, revolutions and political campaigns." Writer Lin Xianzhi (2000) eulogized, "Many translators even famous ones translate what they major in or out of personal taste. Few are like Dong, who translates to change society. Dong's translations manifest his reflections of life and society. He is very highly conscious in his translation."

## 3. DONG'S VIEWS ON TRANSLATION

Besides translating, Dong wrote articles discussing his translation experiences and views, which reflect his thinking over the basic problems in translation. From the article written in 1978 about metonymy in modern English to the one in 1988 about the lack of translation criticism, Dong published about 50 essays, which provide enlightenment for translation practice and theoretical studies as well.

Dong was in meticulous and serious in translation, which fostered a spirit of shouldering responsibility – to the original author, to readers, to the original book and the translated book, all in all, to the society. Therefore, in his articles he stressed "thorough understanding of the original", "it is important to master translation techniques, but it is more important to understand the original", "the foremost duty of translators is to present the original faithfully to target readers". And in order to achieve that, to be responsible to the original, a translator should "be equipped with abundant knowledge of various disciplines, society and life", "the problem of knowledge is one faced by every translator", "one must acquire some knowledge about modern history of China". As early as in 1950s, the linguist Lü Shuxiang realized the importance of versatile knowledge for translators and wrote an article entitled "Translator and Jack of all Trades", stressing the competence of a translator entails wide scope of knowledge. Yet this failed to obtain enough attention in translation circles. Thirty years later, Dong, coincidentally with another famous English expert Wang Zongyan, both called upon our attention at this same problem by two articles published in 1980 in the same issue of the translation studies periodical *Translators' Notes*.

In order to be responsible for target text and reader, Dong felt it necessary to "enhance writing ability in Chinese". Therefore, he paid particular attention to the translation of the names of people, places, books and neologisms. His related articles are "A Tentative View on Name Translation Reform", "Chaos in Name

Translation”, “Incorrigible Habits in Translating Place Names”, “Discussing Translation with Han Suyin”, “On the Translation of ‘CYNICAL’”, “The Metaphor of Person Names” “人名的借喻”, “The Beat Generation and Bummer Literature” and “Western Humanism and Chinese Humanist Spirit”. These articles are basically concerned with problems of hypotaxis vs. parataxis, meaning equivalence vs. formal equivalence, Chinglish in translating Chinese into English and “Europeanization” in translating English into Chinese. His proposed translation principles are mostly succinct and instructive. For example, Dong observed, “English nouns are mostly neutral in literal meaning, while Chinese nouns are strong in the sense of appreciative or derogatory meaning. So when translating English neutral nouns into Chinese, translators need to choose words that correspond to the context in terms of affective meaning.” “Puns, humor, and poetry belong to that part of every language that is untranslatable. To translate them by the method of explanation will do.” “Chinese idioms when used properly in translation can add to fluency; but when overused can be boring, and when misused, can be ambiguous.”

Having been doing translation for more than 40 years, Dong was quite familiar with the status of translation and translators. In his articles he mentioned “translation in China has no status”; “translators, home and abroad, are underpaid”; “it is far better to translate by oneself than to edit others’ translations”. Therefore, in his articles he advocated to “establish academic organizations like translation institutes and translator associations” to “attach importance to translation”. These plausible suggestions are now the reality. Other topics in his articles are about some hot translation phenomena and problems. For instance, he was worried about “the commercial practices of some publishing houses may lead to the poor quality of serious literature and popular literature”. He pointed out “it was the responsibility of publishing institutions to ensure the quality of translations”. “Translation talents are to be found through proper selection.” In “Craze for Translating Book Series”, he expressed his wish for publishing houses to have the same enthusiasm in translating foreign books with literary value and books with academic value as in translating the book series. Though he declined the offer to re-translate the Bible, he proposed valuable suggestions to the publishing house. Dong, versatile in his interests, also wrote about some non-mainstream translation phenomena. For instance, he thought highly of the famous dramatist and translator, Ying Ruocheng’s talk show translation. In “Mistakes Made in TV Series Translation” he believed in not too harsh requirements in movie or TV series translation.

Dong’s keen insights about translation, which came from his many years of translation practices are concise and without ostentations. His translations and essay collections can enhance readers’ knowledge, increase their understanding and purify their minds.

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## CONCLUSION

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Dong’s choices of books to be translated are based on his conscience and ration. When translating, his attitude is to be true to facts. His ambitions in translations are in pursuit of truth and essence. In his whole life he was persistent in pursuits of lofty objects despite ill fate and unfair treatments. His translation activities began with news translation, then to book translation, whose topics ranged from politics, culture, history and literature. What he left behind are voluminous and beautiful writings and deep reflections upon translation theory and practices. This paper reviews Mr. Dong Leshan’s translational achievements, characteristics, and view, intending to summarize his contributions to translation and highlight his position as a thinker-translator, a translator master.

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