

## On the Role of Translation in the Reconfiguration of Chinese Literary Field in the May Fourth Era

### SUR LE RÔLE DE LA TRADUCTION DANS LA RECONFIGURATION DU CHAMP LITTÉRAIRE CHINOIS DANS LA PÉRIODE DU 4 MAI

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**Abstract:** The May Fourth era was a vigorous period in translation theory and practice in China, as well as a crucial period for the formation of Chinese discourse of modernity. Taking some of Bourdieu's concepts as a starting point, this paper attempts to study the key role of translation in the reconfiguration of Chinese literary field during the May Fourth era. Modern Chinese intellectuals relied on translation for articulation of their cultural enlightenment project, and derived much of their cultural power from their translation of Western works at that time. It is indicated that translation in the May Fourth era, far from being considered a secondary, marginal activity, constituted one of the important elements participating in the struggle for cultural legitimation and supremacy, and provided easy access to "cultural capital" and "symbolic power" for modern Chinese intellectuals in the Chinese discourse of modernity during the early twentieth century.

**Key words:** translation; modernity; literary field; cultural capital; symbolic power; May Fourth era

**Résumé:** La période du 4 mai a été non seulement une période vigoureuse des théories et des pratiques de traduction en Chine, mais aussi une période cruciale pour la formation du discours chinois de la moderne. En empruntant certains concepts de Bourdieu comme le point de départ, ce document tente d'étudier le rôle clé de la traduction dans la reconfiguration du champ littéraire chinois au cours de la période du 4 mai. A cette époque, les intellectuels chinois modernes se sont appuyés sur la traduction pour former leur projet culturel, et ils ont obtenu une grande partie de leur puissance culturelle de la traduction des œuvres occidentales. Il est indiqué que la traduction de la période du 4 mai, loin d'être considérée comme une activité secondaire et marginale, constituait l'un des éléments importants dans la lutte pour la légitimation et la suprématie culturelles, et qu'elle a facilité l'accès au «capital culturel» et au «pouvoir symbolique» pour les intellectuels chinois modernes dans le discours chinois de la modernité au cours du début du XXe siècle.

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\*Received 20 June 2010; accepted 15 August 2010

**Mots-clés:** traduction; modernité; champ littéraire, capital culturel, pouvoir symbolique; période du 4 mai

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The May Fourth era was a crucial period for the formation of Chinese discourse of modernity. During this period, there was an upsurge of translation production. The Chinese intelligentsia translated Western works with great enthusiasm, critiqued their own legacies, and reevaluated their cultural tradition. To a certain extent, they paved the way for China's initiation into the Modern age.

Translation had been traditionally regarded as a servile activity. In the source-oriented paradigm, the negativity of translation tended to be highlighted, and the translated text stood in a lower position *vis-à-vis* the hegemonic position of the source text. "It is suggested that translation 'betrays', 'traduces', 'diminishes', 'reduces', 'loses' parts of the original; translation is 'derivative', 'mechanical', 'secondary'; poetry is lost in translation; certain writers are 'untranslatable'" (Bassnett, 1993, p.140). However, translation in the May Fourth era, far from being considered a marginal activity, constituted one of the important elements participating in the struggle for cultural legitimation and supremacy, exerting great symbolic violence upon Chinese cultural and literary tradition.

Taking some of Bourdieu's concepts as a starting point, this paper makes an attempt to study the important role of translation in the reconfiguration of Chinese literary field where the interaction between writers, translators, critics, and institutions were evolving and gaining in sophistication in the social and cultural space of China in the 1920s. To a considerable extent, the formation of modern Chinese literature was facilitated by a large scale of translations of Western literary works at that time. The decisions about what to translate, how to translate and what strategies should be used in the translation practice were tied up with socio-political agendas and literary dynamics. As a case study, we analyze how modern Chinese intellectuals reproduced the value of the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* in China and transformed it into a literary canon to serve the intellectual agenda in the May Fourth era. Although Chinese literary field might not be the exact way as what Bourdieu had described about French literary field, we might as well adopt his field theory to understand the important role of translation in Chinese literary field during the 1920s, for his perceptive analysis of French literary field provides us with key terms for conceiving modern Chinese literary practice as a "field", and viewing translation as a primary, innovative, or even subversive force in the reconfiguration of Chinese literary field in the May Fourth era. Hopefully, this study might enhance our understanding of the contiguity of the relationship between translation, modernity and cultural power in Chinese literary field in the May Fourth era.

## 2. POSITION AND POWER RELATIONS IN LITERARY FIELD

The "literary field" (*champ littéraire*), a critical term originally formulated by Bourdieu in *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, is a force-field acting on all those who enter it, and acting in a differential manner according to the positions they occupy there, and at the same time it is a field of competitive struggles which tend to conserve or transform this force-field. The principle of change in works resides in the literary field and in the struggles among social agents whose strategies depend on the interest they have in conserving or in transforming the structure of distribution, hence either in perpetuating the current conventions or in subverting them.

Because of the hierarchy established in the relations among the different kinds of capital and among their holders, the literary field occupies a subordinated position within the field of power. Literary revolutions result from the transformations of the relations of force between the literary field and the field of power. When a new literary or artistic group imposes itself on the field, formerly dominant productions might be downgraded to the status of an outmoded cultural product, hence transforming the power relations of the literary field. In the words of Bourdieu,

The structure of the field is a state of the power relations among the agents or institutions engaged in the struggle, or, to put it another way, a state of the distribution of the specific capital which has been accumulated in the course of the previous struggles and which orients subsequent strategies. This structure, which governs the strategies aimed at transforming it, is

itself always at stake. The struggles, which take place within the field, are about the monopoly of the legitimate violence (specific authority), which is characteristic of the field in question, which means, ultimately, the conservation or subversion of the structure of the distribution of the specific capital (Bourdieu, 1993a, p.73).

With a fascinating structural mapping of arenas of struggle over different types of capital for power and privilege, Bourdieu's field theory not only directs researchers to give more attention to the field of power which lies behind the literary field, but also to take a greater interest in the "position-takings" within the literary field itself. He suggests that the literary field is structured by the distribution of available "positions" and by the objective characteristics of the social agents occupying them. In Bourdieu's usage, "position" is a term with great breadth of meaning, encompassing not just "work" and "genre", but also a writer's political activities (e.g. the publication of a manifest, the formation of literary societies and the debates in which the writer engages). Creating and occupying these various "positions" are "social agents" of different dispositions, that is, writers, critics, editors, publishers, and sponsors, etc., each of them possessing differing amounts of "cultural capital". The interactions and struggles between "positions", or the relationships between social agents and literary institutions, together build and drive the development of the "literary field" and its laws of functioning. As Bourdieu notes,

Each field is relatively autonomous but structurally homologous with the others. Its structure, at any given moment, is determined by the relations between the positions agents occupy in the field. A field is a dynamic concept in that a change in the positions of agents necessarily entails a change in the field's structure (Bourdieu, 1996, p.122)

### 3. TRANSLATION AND LITERARY REVOLUTION IN CHINESE LITERARY FIELD

On May 4th, 1919, students in Beijing demonstrated in protest against the Chinese government's policy towards Japan, which resulted in a seismic societal shift in China. During the May Fourth era, the modern Chinese intellectuals advocated Western ideas of science and democracy, promoting a vast modernization movement to build a new China. The authority of long-established Confucianism and traditional ethics suffered a fundamental and devastating stroke and new Western ideas were exalted. The power relations were changed at the heart of the field of cultural production in China.

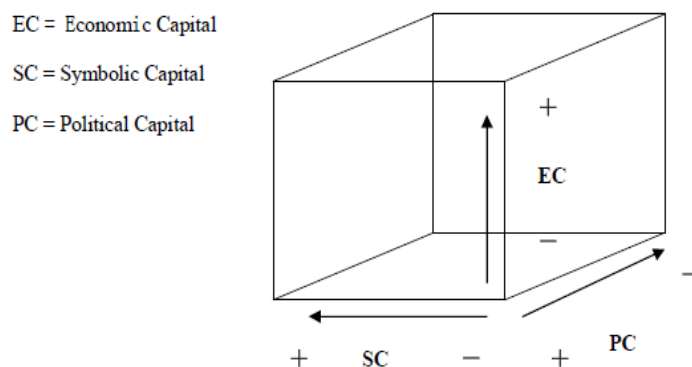


Figure 1. Forces in the modern Chinese literary field

In the May Fourth era, massive translations of Western works were produced and traditional Chinese literature, philosophy, social and political institutions were fiercely attacked. Interspersed with a series of ideological debates and polemics, the modern Chinese literary field encompassed a wide range of writers, translators, scholars, literary critics, literary societies, as well as publishing companies. The major oppositional forces within Chinese literary field were those between the new and the old, the high and the low, the East and the West, as well as the traditional and the anti-traditional in the struggle for the symbolic power of cultural legitimacy and supremacy. In Hockx's postulation, the modern Chinese literary field

could be structured around three kinds of capital: the symbolic, the economic and the political, which is schematized as a “force field” (see Figure 1. Hockx,1999, p.17).

When modern Chinese intellectuals launched the literary revolution in the May Fourth era, the avant-garde emphatically espoused new literature and attached great importance to literary translation, exerting great symbolic violence on the configuration of Chinese literary field. By writing so-called new literature, they adopted a new position within the literary field of the time, which was dualistically structured around an opposition between old and new literature. The subfield of new literature grew steadily during the 1920s as new positions were continuously introduced, often on basis of foreign examples.

As the avant-garde of New Literature Movement, Hu Shi took a leading position in the modern Chinese literary field, and accumulated a large number of cultural capital as well as symbolic capital in the May Fourth era. He was educated in the United States and received his doctorate in philosophy from Columbia University. Soon after his return to China, he was appointed professor of philosophy at Beijing University. In January 1917, He raised the clarion-call for New Literature and started the literary revolution in an influential journal called *La Jeunesse* with an article entitled “Some suggestions for the reform of Chinese literature”. In this important article, he argued that traditional writing carried no real meaning, criticizing it for paying too much attention to style but little or no attention to content. Chen Duxiu, the chief editor of *La Jeunesse*, responded to Hu Shi’s call with his article “On literary revolution”. He predicted that new literature would be based on the vernacular literature, and held up the Western writers, for instance, Dickens, Hugo, Goethe, Wilde, and Zola, as examples of literary heroes. With a sudden influx of literary translations from the West, literary revolution led to the acceptance of the vernacular language by the writers and translators advocating new literature over the next several years. Within a very short time, the use of the vernacular language spread nationwide. By 1922, it had become officially recognized as the official language, or what Bourdieu called the “legitimate language”.

The legitimacy of the vernacular language encouraged writers to take their styles from Western literature, and had particularly far-reaching consequences for the emergence and prosperity of modern Chinese literature. In order to write modern literature in the vernacular, the Chinese were obliged to model their writing styles on Western literature. Many of the leading Chinese writers of the 1920s served a kind of apprenticeship in translating from Western literature and Japanese literature. These translations were completely different from the translations done by older generation translators such as Yan Fu and Lin Shu. They were all done in vernacular Chinese and the language used in the translations was greatly influenced by the grammar and syntax of the original. Undoubtedly, these new translations had a great impact on Chinese literary field.

The advances of the New Literature Movement brought a new appreciation of the realistic literature of political and social reform in the West. By 1919, translations in the vernacular had been an accepted feature of the new magazines, and realistic novels and dramas had replaced the romantic or Victorian fiction of the late Qing dynasty. Other leading magazines of the Movement, along with their articles on the philosophy, politics, ethics and social reforms, also included translations of Western fiction and drama. In this way, numerous translations of Western literature became an integral part of the New Literature Movement in Chinese literary field of the 1920s.

With a large scale of translations from the West, Confucian ethics and values were systematically denunciated and severely attacked by modern intellectuals in the May Fourth era. As an act of violence, literary translations in the May Fourth era imposed a threat on traditional Chinese literature, and hence a threat on those power-holders in the Chinese cultural field at that particular time.

#### **4. TRANSLATION AND LITERARY CANON FORMATION**

As modern Chinese intellectuals considered Confucianism as a stumbling block on the road to a modern and strong nation, they eagerly translated Western ideas and tried to import a new force for the transformation of the Chinese habitus in the May Fourth era. Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian dramatist, came to China just in time to spark the fire and serve as a guiding light for the New Culture Movement. Although Ibsen was a foreign dramatist who originally wrote in Norwegian, a much less spoken language, modern

Chinese intellectuals reproduced the value of Ibsen's play in its transmission to China and transformed it into a literary canon to serve the intellectual agenda in the May Fourth era.

In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu points to two fundamental forms of literary production: the production of the work and the production of the value of the work. In his view, "the production of discourse (critical, historical, etc.) about the work of art is one of the conditions of production of the work" (Bourdieu, 1993b, p.35). In this way Bourdieu's theory not only observes the production of the literary work itself, but also the symbolic production of the work, i.e., the production of the value of the work. Therefore, it is not only producers of works (e.g. writers), but also "producers of value" (e.g. critics, editors, publishers, etc.) who contribute to the production of a given work. In *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, John Guillory draws upon Bourdieu's sociological theories and argues that the ideological or cultural value of the texts in the canon do not lie in the texts themselves but in the processes and institutions that gives these texts value. He writes, "canonicity is not a property of the work itself but of its transmission and its relation to institutions" (Guillory, 1993, p.55). In other words, canon formation of the translated work is thus concerned not only with the work itself and its immediate producers of the work in the source literary field, such as authors, but also with those social agents and institutions such as translators, critics, editors, patrons, commentators, schools, academia, and publishing houses that produce or reproduce the value of the text in the target literary field, and that create the consumers and audiences capable of recognizing and desiring that value.

With regard to the translation and reception of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in China, Hu Shi was one of the most important cultural mediators and social agents in the modern Chinese literary field. In collaboration with his student Luo Jialun, Hu Shi translated Ibsen's *A Doll's House* as *Nala* in a special issue of *La Jeunesse* on Ibsen in June 1918. In addition, the special issue also included an introductory essay "Ibsenism" by Hu Shi, a biography of Ibsen by Yuan Zhenying, and complete translations of *An Enemy of the People* and *Little Eyolf* which were serialized in the magazine. For the first time in Chinese journalistic history, an entire issue was devoted to a single foreign literary figure. It had a huge impact on the Chinese literary field and proved very effective in drawing people's attention to Ibsen and his social-problem plays. Upheld by the leading figures such as Hu Shi in modern Chinese literary field, *Nala* became the incarnation of the emancipated woman with numerous translations and stage performances in the May Fourth era. Whether Ibsen meant to advocate the cause of women's rights or not seemed to have little to do with *Nala* as the embodiment of New Woman in the May Fourth era. Ibsen's text dissolved into the background, and the reception of Ibsen's play actually became the reception of *Nala* as New Woman in the modern Chinese literary field.

With the publication of a special issue of *La Jeunesse* on Ibsen, a campaign for the popularization of Ibsen in China was started. Numerous other translations of Ibsen's works, for instance, *Ghosts*; *The Wild Duck*; *The Lady from the Sea*; etc., were published in Chinese newspapers and magazines. Ibsen's major plays were soon staged and met with immense popularity in major cities in China. Among Ibsen's plays, *A Doll's House* stood out as the most popular in the modern Chinese literary field. As the modern self in the discourse of New Woman, *Nala* provided the most compelling image for Chinese women to fight against the traditional Confucian gender ideology and lead the way towards the individualistic modernity in the modern Chinese literary field.

As the translator, Hu Shi benefited from the symbolic capital invested in the original work. Through his translation, he intervened as a social agent who conferred on the author and on the work a quantity of capital by submitting it to the logic of a target literary field, and to its mechanisms of recognition. It is interesting to note that his introductory essay "Ibsenism" in the special issue of *La Jeunesse* was of great significance for the translation and reception of Ibsen's works in the modern Chinese literary field. In "Ibsenism", he interpreted Ibsen's ideas about the relationship of family, society, and the individual, and championed individuals who sought self-fulfillment and achieved self-realization. His essay on Ibsen directed Chinese people's views of Ibsen in the May Fourth era and became the most authoritative Chinese interpretation of Ibsen for many decades.

In "A reply to T.F.C. on drama translation", Hu Shi explicitly claimed that "our intention [in translating and introducing foreign plays] is to inculcate the ideas upon Chinese people by means of these dramas. If you read our special issue on Ibsen, you would know our focus on Ibsen is that he is portrayed as a social reformer rather than an artist" (Hu, 1919. my translation). Indeed, Hu Shi appropriated Ibsen's symbolic

capital to promote his own philosophy. As he later acknowledged in his essay "Introducing my own ideology", "Ibsenism represents my philosophy and my religion" (Hu, 1930, p.1-12. my translation). Hence, Ibsenism might be interpreted as Hu-Shi-ism to some extent.

As Elisabeth Eide put it, "the Chinese never read Ibsen to find aesthetic solutions to literary problems. They encountered Ibsen through "Ibsenism", and "Ibsenism" determined what they would see in Ibsen" (Eide, 1987, p.151). As the leading figure of New Culture Movement, Hu Shi enjoyed great symbolic power in the eyes of the Chinese reading public, exerting a great impact on later interpretations of Ibsen in Chinese literary field. His essay "Ibsenism" turned out to be very influential after its publication, and contributed to a literary renovation not only in drama but also in other genres such as fiction and poetry.

## **5. LITERAL TRANSLATION, STIFF TRANSLATION, AND CULTURAL CRITIQUE**

As May Fourth China was at the threshold of entering the Western narrative of modernity, "the West" gained far more symbolic power in the May Fourth era than ever before. A great deal of translations, adaptations, and critical evaluation of Western works were produced in the May Fourth era. Foreign writers and literary trends in the West were very popular in the modern Chinese literary field, such as Byron, Hugo, Keats, Maupassant, Ibsenism, realism, naturalism, romanticism, feminism, as well as Marxism. A superficial knowledge of these big names and big "isms" instantly bestowed prestigious status in the Chinese literary field.

The strategies employed in literary translation also served as a discursive site for the Chinese intellectuals of different cliques to negotiate and contest their ideas. The decisions about what to translate, how to translate and what strategies should be used in the translation practice were tied up with socio-political agendas and literary dynamics. By adopting different methodologies, writers and translators attempted to select different texts and apply different linguistic registers to promote social and cultural distinctions among other intellectual groups in the newly emerging Chinese literary field.

Literal translation began to gain momentum only after the May Fourth era, as a reaction to free translation prevalent in the late Qing dynasty. In his important essay "Literal translation, smooth translation, and distortion", Mao Dun flatly denounced Lin Shu's translations as "distortion", advocating for literal translation, not only to preserve the meaning of the original text, but more importantly to transform Chinese vernacular as a literary medium. Like Mao Dun, Lu Xun proposed "literal translation", and even suggested "stiff translation" when it was necessary. The publication of Liang Shiqiu's "On Mr. Lu Xun's 'stiff translation'", sparked off a series of heated debates on literary translation vs. free translation in the modern Chinese literary field. Quoting awkward sentences from Lu Xun's recent translation of Lunacharsky's *Literature and Criticism*, Liang Shiqiu condemned this kind of translation as "dead translation". It seemed to him that Lu Xun had followed the original text too closely and ended up with syntax much too convoluted to be understood. He described the experience of reading this kind of "dead translation" like "reading a map, you have to use your finger to look for the syntactical cue and location" (Liang, 1929, p.1-4). In response to this criticism, Lu Xun wrote an essay entitled "'Stiff translation' and the 'class nature of literature'", offering a "political" explanation for his preference for extreme literalism. Censuring Liang Shiqiu for his bourgeois values and goals in the "other camp", Lu Xun stressed that his intended readers were none other than proletarian literary critics, and for that particular reason, close adherence to almost every word of the original became necessary. When the debate in newspapers and journals reached a feverish pitch, most intellectuals got involved, with a diversity of positions being taken. As Bourdieu describes,

A field is always the site of struggles in which individuals seek to maintain or change the distribution of the forms of capital specific to it. The individuals who are involved in these struggles will have differing aims – some will seek to preserve the status quo, others to change it – and differing chances of winning or losing, depending on where they are located in the structured space of positions (Bourdieu, 1991, p.14).

The Chinese intellectual discourse of translation is interwoven with the process of competitions among the modern intellectuals for representing the new cultural authority. In the May Fourth era, there were

numerous debates among translators with different political agendas around issues of definition, language, methods, intended readership, choice of materials, and function of translation. These debates took on many different forms and went in different directions. There were arguments, quarrels and fights between the avant-garde, more progressive and the established, more conservative translators, between the Left Wing and the Right Wing, between the reform-minded and the revolution-minded, as well as between the orthodoxy and the heterodoxy. To a certain extent, the discursive practice of translation was a discourse of symbolic power in the May Fourth era, for the May Fourth intellectuals wielded the symbolic power of Western works over the unenlightened masses and the conservative pedant, and justified their cultural critique as necessary political intervention and as a form of cultural production.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The May Fourth era was a vigorous period in translation theory and practice in China. In *Twenty-Century Chinese Translation Theory*, Leo Tak-hung Chan notes that it is in the May Fourth era that one sees translation theory entering a distinctly modern phase, when translations assume a key role in ushering what has been termed Chinese modernity (Chan, 2004, p.15). Literary translation in the May Fourth era was never an innocent or neutral linguistic exercise, but a tension-ridden “contact zone”, where different cultural traditions clashed in the social and cultural space of China in the 1920s. With a massive influx of literary translations from the West, a new hybrid culture identity emerged from the interweaving of elements of Self and the Other. Individuals, institutions and ideologies involved in the production of literary texts could be “new” vs. “old”, “avant-garde” vs. “traditional”, “high” vs. “low,” or anything in between. The interaction and interplay between these positions depended on the distribution of power and capital.

The modern Chinese literary field was a site of linguistic and cultural hybridity as a result of numerous translations from different nations and cultures in the May Fourth era. There was an obvious fluctuation in the overall degree of hybridity of Chinese translations of Western literature. In the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, there were only some perceptible heterogeneous elements in the translations, and the degree of hybridity was very low. However, in the May Fourth era, with the increase of heterogeneous elements in translations, the degree of hybridity rose sharply. Literary translators tried to retain Europeanized linguistic features such as long modifiers and strange collocations to import the heterogeneous elements from the original. The heterogeneity from these translations stimulated literary innovations and transformations in the modern Chinese literary field while cultural identity was reshaped in the early twentieth century.

With the gradual fading away of classical writing as a form of cultural production, translation quickly grew to become the dominant part of Chinese literary field, and New Literature had become high literature, produced and consumed by the elite intellectuals at that time. Within an amazingly short period of time, New Literature producers established themselves in the modern Chinese literary field through an emphatic espousal of Western literature. To a large extent, the May Fourth intelligentsia relied on translation for articulation of their cultural enlightenment project, and derived much of their cultural power from their translation of Western works. Therefore, a contiguity of relationships could be located between translation, modernity, and cultural power in the May Fourth era. In the specific cultural field, translation in the May Fourth era provided easy access to “cultural capital” and “symbolic power” for modern Chinese intellectuals in the Chinese discourse of modernity.

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