

The Purpose of Translation Activities in Different Historical Contexts

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Abstract

Since the establishment of the official position of “Xiangxu” in the Zhou Dynasty, which marked the beginning of the history of translation in China, it has been more than 3,000 years. While the purposes of translation have changed over different historical contexts, from the early history for the consolidation of centralised power, to the modern era when eyes were on the western world, to the current communication between China and foreign countries regarding the politics, economy, culture, and social life. This article analyses the purposes of translation in three areas: diplomacy, absorption of foreign cultures and ideological construction, in the context of ancient China to the Republic of China.

Key words: Purpose of translation; Diplomacy; Cultural communication; Ideological construction

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1. INTRODUCTION

Translation between China and the West has a long history. In *A Brief History of Chinese Translation: Ancient Times*, Ma Zuyi (2006), a pioneer in the study of Chinese translation history, divided the history of translation in China into four major climaxes: translation of Buddhist scriptures from the Eastern Han to the Tang and Song dynasties (25-1279), scientific and technical translations

in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties (1628-1700), Western learning spreading to the East from the Opium War to the May Fourth Movement (1840-1919), and translation activities after the reform and opening up (1978-). A glance at the history of translation in China reveals that translation may have served three purposes. The first is diplomacy, which seems to have been the main purpose of translation during the reign of Han nationality and after the Opium Wars. The second is the absorption of advanced foreign culture, which is manifested in the translation and absorption of advanced foreign culture. The third is the ideological construction, which was due to the influence of the social environment in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China.

2. PURPOSE OF TRANSLATION ACTIVITIES IN CHINA: DIPLOMACY

In the *Dictionary of Chinese Official Systems in Previous Dynasties*, “Xiangxu, set up by the Zhou Dynasty, was responsible for the reception of ambassadors and guests from ethnic minority countries, and for translations”. Translation work during this period was mainly to translate the language of the northern Nomad into the official language of Central Plains, Yayan (ancient Mandarin). The Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC-256 BC) was a country with a diverse ethnic structure, and the integration of peoples and tribes for the exchange of information led to the development of translation activities. However, as the writing and language of the Zhou Dynasty failed to be unified, each tribe would have had a special translator in charge. For example, in *The Book of Rite: Governance System*, it is written that “the people from different kingdoms do not speak the same language, in order to exchange and express information with each other, the translator in the east was called “Ji [寄]”, the one in the south was called “Xiang [象]”, the one in the west was called “Didi [狄鞮]”, and the one in the north was called

“Yi [译]”. In contrast to today’s interpreters, the “Xiangxu” were more like messengers who understood the dialect and were responsible for conveying the words of the Kings of Zhou Dynasty to the Rong and Di, as well as other tribes.

After the fall of the Zhou Dynasty, the role of “Xiangxu” was taken seriously by later dynasties, which set up special diplomatic agencies to conduct diplomatic affairs. In the Han Dynasty (202 BC-220 AD), In the Han dynasty, Emperor Liu Qi changed the name of the “Dianke [典客]” to “Daxingling [大行令]”, which was also in charge of the relations with the vassal states and, because of the feudal system of the Han Dynasty, the “Daxingling” was also in charge of the tributes paid by the vassal states. In addition, in order to meet the needs of diplomacy with other countries, the Han Dynasty also set up schools to educate foreign languages and train translators. For example, it is written in the *Shi Huo Zhi: First Volume* that “at the age of eight, children entered the primary school and learned the heavenly stems and earthly branches, texts and arithmetic of five directions”. During the Song-Liao-Jin confrontation (during the 10th to 11th centuries), ethnic and hierarchical conflicts were intertwined. In order to achieve the need to know one’s enemy, the imperial court added ethnic translations of Khitan, Nurchen, and Tangut to the imperial examinations.

By the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), trade between the Central Plains and various ethnic groups and countries required a large number of translators. Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang, the Taizu of the Ming Dynasty, had set up the Huitong Hall to facilitate communication between officials during foreign exchanges and compiled the *Hua Yi Yi Yu*. All the languages in the book were collected by the Si Yi Guan [四译馆] and the relevant provincial governors, and in addition to Western translations, a total of 26 kinds and 30 volumes of regional ethnic translations of Western Barbarians, ethnic minorities in Sichuan, Yunnan and Guangxi were included to facilitate the training of translators. By the fifth year of Yongle (1407), Emperor Zhu Di had set up the Siyi Hall [四夷馆], the first official specialised institution in Chinese history to train translators. The Siyi Hall was divided into ten halls, where students from the Imperial College were selected to train as translators, mainly to translate the documents of the tributary countries and to teach the languages and scripts of the surrounding countries. However, as the number of people trained by the Siyi Hall was relatively small and the level of translation was not high, the language problem not only affected direct communication between the two sides, but also restricted the exchange of deep culture.

Afterwards, with the outbreak of the Opium War at the end of the Qing Dynasty, the imperialist invasion began to dismantle China’s feudal system and at the same time awakened the intellectuals, at which time the role of

translation changed from consolidating centralised power to saving and defending the country.

In 1861, Prince Gong Wang Yixin and Wen Xiang requested the founding of the Tongwen Guan (School of Combined Learning) in Peking, with the aim of training diplomats and translators so that they would not be “deceived” in diplomacy with foreigners. From its foundation in 1862 to its incorporation into the Imperial University of Peking in 1902, Tongwen Guan trained hundreds of translators and diplomats over a period of 40 years, for example, Lian Fang, the vice minister of The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was one of the first trainees. His translation, *Guide Diplomatique*, the first international law translation dedicated to the Western diplomatic system in the late Qing Dynasty, provided a diplomatic guide for the Qing government and officials. In this book, Lian Fang and Qing Chang had translated many modern diplomatic terms, such as “minister”, “lettre de creance”, “note diplomatique”, “passeport”, “Ministère des affaires étrangères”, “conseille”, “immunité”, and so forth, which still influence China’s diplomatic career today. Furthermore, students and graduates of Tongwen Guan were among the interpreters accompanying Qing ambassadors on their visits to foreign countries and members of their embassies, showing that Tongwen Guan started the training of modern Chinese diplomats. Meanwhile, with the rise of the Self-Strengthening Movement, the late Qing government established the first organ in charge of foreign affairs in China’s diplomatic history in 1861, the “Office for the General Management of Affairs Concerning the Various Countries”, which later became the “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs”. Besides, a number of translators were trained through the opening of academies and the dispatch of international students, which made important contributions to the Qing government’s understanding of the response to Chinese affairs abroad.

3. PURPOSE OF TRANSLATION ACTIVITIES IN CHINA: ABSORPTION OF ADVANCED FOREIGN CULTURE

As a bridge for cross-cultural communication, translation activities have played an important role in both Chinese and foreign cultural exchanges throughout history. For example, the translation of Buddhist scriptures from the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty (184-220) to the Song Dynasty (960-1279), and the translation of Indian medicine books and calendars that accompanied the translation of Buddhist scriptures. What’s more, the translation of Chinese texts into their own language during the Liao (907-1125), Jin (1115-1234), Western Xia (1038-1227), Yuan (1271-1368), and Qing (1636-1912) dynasties was also part of the learning of the advanced culture of

the Han nationality. The large number of translations of Western studies at the end of the Qing Dynasty is another example of China's learning from advanced Western culture.

The translation of Buddhist scriptures in China began with An Shigao in the Eastern Han Dynasty, developed rapidly during the Wei, Jin and Northern and Southern Dynasties, reached its heyday during the Tang Dynasty, began to decline during the Northern Song Dynasty, and basically came to an end after the Yuan Dynasty. As Buddhism was introduced to China as an exotic culture and eventually developed into Chinese Buddhism, it can be said that translation of Buddhist scriptures played an important role (Yu Fei, 2020). The early translations of the scriptures were represented by Paramartha and Kumārajīva, whose study of translation theory and technique made discoveries and advances during this period compared with the starting period. Meanwhile, Fu Jian and Yao Xing began to organize translation workshops and select many talents to participate in translation activities. The translation of the scriptures entered a period of rapid development as it moved from private and individual translations to official and collective translations. Taking Kumārajīva's translation thoughts as an example, the process of his translation was to first translate Sanskrit into Chinese, understand the meaning, compare it with previous translations, discuss it in detail, complete the first draft, and then revised it with "theory". After the book was completed, it was revised and proofread repeatedly to make sure that the text was readable before it was finalized (Ma Zuyi, 1984). In a stylistic change from the archaic style of the past, Kumārajīva has created a style that feels like a combination of foreign language and Chinese intonation, which retains the original meaning of Sanskrit while at the same time fully accommodating the language habits of the Chinese. Moreover, during the reign of Emperor Wen Huan (394-416), he and his disciples translated several scriptures such as *Mahaprajna-paramita-sutra*, *Lotus Sutra*, *Diamond Sutra*, and so forth, thereby enabling many words from the scriptures to enter everyday Chinese expressions, such as "聚沙成塔" (grains of sand can be grouped together to form a pagoda) and "梦幻泡影" (a dreamy illusion and an empty bubble).

Afterwards in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), the translation of the scriptures entered a period of peak development, and the scriptures translated greatly surpassed the previous dynasties in terms of fidelity to the original texts. In this period, Xuan Zang was the representative of the six methods of translating the scriptures, namely, the method of supplementation, omission, displacement, synectics, translation of names, and reduction of pronouns, which have also played a very important role in guiding contemporary translation practice (Yu Fei, 2020). Besides, based on his own

translation practice, Xuan Zang put forward the principle of "five kinds of terms not translated" on the issue of transliteration and free translation, which enabled the Chinese translation of Buddhism to reach the highest level of quality. More importantly, he translated works such as *Lao Tzu* and *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* into Sanskrit and spread them to the Tianzhu (historical Chinese name for India), and the scriptures he translated were also transmitted to the Korean peninsula, Japan, and Vietnam, making him the first translator of all time.

In its heyday, the development of the translation system under Xuan Zang was more complete. The translation team became increasingly international, the scale of scripture production expanded, many errors in translations of the previous dynasties were corrected, and the spread of Buddhism in China was facilitated. In *Translation Literature and Buddhist Scripture*, Liang Qichao, who had a significant influence on the political reformation of modern China, commented that "Xuan Zang's literal translation of the scriptures was a balanced translation that conveyed the original meaning exactly".

Different from the translation of Buddhist scriptures, the translation in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China period was to promote the spread of new education and new ideas, which can be broadly divided into two stages: from the Opium War to the pre-May Fourth Movement, and from the May Fourth Movement to the eve of War of Liberation. As China began to degenerate into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society after the Opium War, the closed-door state that had lasted for many years came crashing down, which prompted patriots and advanced intellectuals to aspire to a new culture and ideology as a means to break the decadent, old-fashioned and backward traditional concepts and culture. During this period, the Chinese translation community actively promoted the translation and dissemination of Western knowledge in natural and philosophical and social sciences, and several translators emerged, including Wei Yuan, Liang Qichao, Yan Fu, and Lin Shu, thus creating a climax in the history of modern translation, "Western learning spreading to the East".

Wei Yuan was one of the first intellectuals in modern times to open his eyes to the world and advocate the study of advanced Western science and technology. His book *Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms* gave the Chinese a new concept of the modern world after a long period of isolation. Although he left no specific theory of translation, Wei Yuan's call for change was equally significant for translation in modern China. In *Principles of Hundred Days Reform*, Liang Qichao put forward the idea of translation: "as far as translation is concerned, three principles should be established: firstly, the choice of the text to be translated, secondly, the selection of examples to be translated, and lastly, the cultivation of translators" (Guo Yanli, 1998:227), raising the translation

to the status of “the first meaning of strengthening the country”. Subsequently, in 1897, Yan Fu translated Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics*, which publicised the idea of “survival of the fittest” and established Yan Fu’s position in modern Chinese thought. Besides, Yan Fu also put forward the criteria of “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” for translation, which include faithful content to the original text, smooth and clear wording, and appropriate word selection in the translation, have had a profound impact on future translations.

4. PURPOSE OF TRANSLATION ACTIVITIES IN CHINA: IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION

Since Qin Shi Huang established a unified multi-ethnic state, Confucianism gradually became the doctrine of social management revered by feudal monarchs and was an important ideological pillar of the feudal dictatorship. The subsequent development of translation activities gradually influenced the changes in ancient Chinese feudal thought and social institutions. The curve of the rise and fall of China’s national fortunes roughly coincides with the rise and fall of the translation business, as translation can introduce new knowledge and stimulate and promote the development of the local society, and if the state does not act on translation, it loses contact with the outside world, thus leading to a stagnant social ideology (Wang Dongfeng, 2019). However, with the rise of the New Culture Movement, the translation of Western studies, led by “democracy [德先生]” and “science [赛先生]”, began to promote science and oppose feudal dictatorship, which created new ideas and theories and promoted the development of democratic thought and politics, the laws of modern science and the spirit of science in society, bringing about a profound impact on China. At the same time, with the spread of Marxism after the New Cultural Movement, translations of Marxist works were widely carried out, which also provided the ideological basis for the founding and development of the Party.

In Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*, there is a famous phrase that has gone down in history: “Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth”. The most evocative of this phrase is the translation of the three prepositions “of”, “by” and “for”. In 1916, Zhao Yuanren wrote to Hu Shi to try to translate this sentence. Hu Shi gave the translations: “This is the government that our people own, run and do for ourselves” (此吾国民所自有、所自操、所自为之政府). The use of the reflexive verb in this sentence is grammatical, but it does not convey the verve of the original. Afterwards, Sun Yat-sen translated it as “having for the people, governing for the people, and enjoying for the people” in *Three Principles of the People Classical Chinese Version*. It was later translated as “of the people, by the people, for the

people” in *The Interpretation of Three Principles of the People*. Grammatically, “of” should be referred to “owned by (the people)”, “by” should mean “governed/elected by (the people)”, and “for” should be “serve (the people)”. Therefore, Sun Yat-sen’s translation was more effective in promoting the spread of the “Three Principles of the People” than Hu Shi’s translation.

After the end of the New Culture Movement, translation shifted from the study of advanced Western thought and culture to the translation climax of communist ideology. During this period, the October Revolution in Russia and the May Fourth Movement in China opened the door to the New Democracy in China and allowed for the widespread spread of Marxism in China. Zhao Bizhen, known as “the first person to translate Marxism in China”, published *Kinsei Syakai Syugi* (Modern Socialism in English) in 1903, which was the first Chinese translation to systematically introduce Marxism. In the book, Zhao Bizhen’s translation was mainly a literal translation, supplemented by deletion, which reproduced the terms “capital [资本]”, “price [价格]”, “use price [使用价格]”, and “surplus price [剩余价格]” from the source language (Xian Ming, 2014). While devoting himself to the revolutionary cause, Qu Qiubai, a “Red Translator”, also translated and publicising many Marxist-Leninist works, including *Foundations of Leninism* and *The Reality*. Besides, he was also the first person to translate L’Internationale into “国际歌”, and to translate it phonetically into the six words “英特耐雄纳尔”. The direct phonetic translation changes the pronunciation very little, is catchy and syllabic, and facilitates the L’Internationale as a link between the Chinese proletarians and the proletarians of the world.

After the 1920s, Li Da and Lei Zhongjian’s joint translation of *Handbook of Dialectical Materialism* met the needs of the revolution and laid a solid foundation for the widespread dissemination of Marxism in China, while also having a profound impact on the formation of philosophical thought of Maoism. In addition to Zhao Bizhen and Qu Qubai, the May Fourth Movement also saw the emergence of “Red Translators” such as Guo Moruo, Zhu Shenghao, Dong Qiusi and Ke Bainian, whose translations also played a huge role in the spread of Marxist ideas in China and the building of the Party.

5. CONCLUSION

Throughout the three thousand years of translation history, the purpose of translation has been determined by the social context of the times in which it was performed, in terms of diplomacy, the absorption of advanced foreign cultures and ideological construction. The translation of Buddhist scriptures, for example, was a necessity for survival and development in China, and was an inevitable requirement and result of the Sinicisation of Buddhism. The diplomatic translations of the late Qing Dynasty were

the result of a compromise between the need to keep up with the world and the need to train people for the modern diplomatic system, as the doors of the country were opened by the great powers. The translation of “Western learning spreading to the East” in the late Qing and early Republic of China periods, and the spread of Marxism after the New Culture Movement were the result of many factors, including the awakening of social thinking and the revival of national liberation, as well as the influence of socialist thinking brought about by the victory of the October Revolution in Russia, which was the result of the mainstream of society.

Of course, translation, as a profession that can be developed in a multidisciplinary manner, has more than the three purposes mentioned above, and different historical periods and different professions have their own purposes for translation. As translation is studied in depth, the purpose of translation will be given a new historical mission.

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