The Imbalance in Translation Between China and Western Cultures

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Translation can reflect relations between different cultures, strong or weak. The study of historical figures of translated publications of a culture related to other cultures may shed light on the power relations between different cultures in a specific way. The paper takes translation between China and other cultures, especially western cultures, as a case study and tries to find out actual causes and possible answers. Faced with the challenge of globalization, Chinese culture needs to reconsider its tradition and position in international communications. In view of some current problems of Chinese culture, this paper is intended to focus on the imbalance in translation between China and western cultures since the end of the 19th century, the negative effects of this imbalance, the causes of the translation imbalance, and to point out some possible ways of understanding the translation imbalance and redressing the problem for the good of Chinese culture and the diversification of world cultures. The paper cites various sources to indicate the statistical imbalance in translation between China and other cultures and analyzes the historical and international scenarios which may have led to the situation. A theoretical analysis is given and possible solutions are proposed by the author.

Keywords: imbalance in translation, Chinese culture, western cultures, diversification of world cultures

Introduction

At present, there are about 6,000 languages in the world. People speaking different languages usually resort to translation or interpretation when it is necessary for them to communicate with each other. And translation seems to be a kind of activity irrelevant to power relations between different languages or cultures. However, when we take a close examination at translation activities (both linguistic translation and cultural translation) in China since the end of the 19th century, we can find translation between Chinese culture and western cultures is a touchstone of the modern history of China.

In terms of translation, China or the Chinese culture has always been on the receiving end of western cultures since the end of the 19th century. At first, after the failure of two Opium Wars (1839–1842; 1856–1860), some scholars and officials in China began to realize the importance of learning western science and technology. Later, social sciences in the west, such as ideas on democracy, politics, freedom, and so on, seemed to be equally or even more important to Chinese. Finally, from the beginning of the 20th century, China embarked on the process of absorbing western literary and artistic works. Throughout the above-mentioned three periods, translation has been the indispensable means of learning from western cultures.

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Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the process of learning from western countries has never stopped, first from the Soviet Union, then from most of the advanced countries in the west since 1978. Meanwhile, China has turned itself from an economically underprivileged country to an economic power in the world today. During this period of over 60 years, China has used translation as an important means of assimilating western sciences, both natural sciences and social sciences. It is safe to say that without translation between Chinese and western cultures in the past decades, China would not be as strong as it is today.

Translation has been a powerhouse in driving China into a modern country. However, are there some aspects of translation that are detrimental to China, to Chinese culture in particular? The answer should be positive. The most salient problem in translation between Chinese and western cultures is the imbalance with regard to both quantity and quality.

Translation Proper

In the 20th century, China translated 106,800 kinds of books from western cultures. In contrast, only about a few hundreds of Chinese books written in the 20th century have been translated into western languages (WANG, 2003, p. 26). In recent years, China has been importing copyrights from foreign countries, most of which are from English originals, while China has been selling only a few copyrights abroad. The imbalance in importing and exporting copyrights is embarrassingly noteworthy. Take the importation and exportation of copyrights for an example. In 2005, China bought 10,894 copyrights of foreign-language publications. Of the over 10,000 imported copyrights, 3,942 are from the United States and 1,674 are from Britain, accounting for more than half of the total. At the same time, China sold only 1,517 copyrights to the world, among which 16 to the United States and 74 to Britain. The ratio of importation and exportation of copyrights between China and the U.S. is as astonishing as over 246:1.¹ Based on this evidence, we may say Chinese people are reading more and more books translated from English or English originals, but the world is reading only a few books of Chinese originals or rendered from Chinese. In particular, American people are paying little attention to Chinese publications.

Cultural Translation

Homi K. Bhabha is the first scholar who presented the idea of "cultural translation". In commenting on the famous Indian writer Rushdie, Bhabha mentioned "Rushdie performs the subversion of its authenticity through the act of *cultural translation*—he relocates the *Koran's* 'intentionality' by repeating and reinscribing it in locale of the novel of postwar cultural migrations and diasporas" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 226). Later, the concept of cultural translation has been adopted by a lot of scholars in various disciplines and has acquired numerous new meanings. In this paper, cultural translation refers to the transformation of a culture in the interaction with other cultures, distancing itself away from its origin and assimilating more and more values and practices of foreign cultures.

The recent years in the new millennium have witnessed a more apparent imbalance in translation between Chinese and western cultures. The natural sciences in China have depended heavily on absorption from western cultures, and social sciences from western cultures have been so widely accepted in China that traditional

¹ See http://www.cppinfo.cn/common/Bulletin/Bulletin_content.aspx?key=50&lmgl_id=508.

Chinese culture has been pushed to a marginal position in the environment where it originated. Chinese culture has been faced with a danger of being westernized.

Chinese language, under great pressure from western languages, especially English, has shown a tendency of turning shallow, mixed with other languages and less colorful. A potential threat is that many young people are paying more attention to learning English than Chinese, and preferring western cultures to Chinese culture. More and more young people are less able to write adequate Chinese and express themselves well in Chinese for they make every effort to learn English while believing English is far more useful for them to go abroad, to land a job in joint ventures, to make money, etc. Another cause of the English learning enthusiasm is business activities. It was estimated that the possible profits in English training in China is as high as 15–30 billion RMB.² Therefore, a lot of companies view English training as an enterprise earning big money, so they are trying every means to promote English training, putting corporate social responsibilities far behind on their agenda.

Besides learning foreign languages, young people in China are adopting more and more foreign festivals, while many of them start to forget when we should observe our traditional Chinese festivals. Christmas Day, Valentine's Day, Halloween Day, and so on are becoming popular in China year on year, at the same time some traditional Chinese festivals are considered as backward, old-fashioned, suitable only to agricultural cultures, such as Qingming Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, and so on. Even Spring Festival, the most important festival in Chinese culture, has become not as exciting as before for fad-following youngsters.

Another aspect of traditional Chinese culture, for instance, Confucianism, has aroused heated debates, too. Some scholars are engaging themselves in the revival of Confucianism, taking the essence and discarding the dross. However, they are vehemently attacked by some scholars who got their education in western countries and returned to China. The returned scholars, for example Xue Yong, believe that Confucianism is completely outdated, is very harmful to a democratic society, and should be discarded forever.³ So we can see many aspects of Chinese culture, including language, festivals, and traditional culture such as Confucianism, are all facing great challenges from the ongoing globalization, in a sense, the spread of English and Americanization, and undergoing a transformation into all-round westernization.

Causes of Imbalance in Translation Between China and Western Cultures

As described in the previous part, we know China's economy lagged behind European powers since the beginning of 19th century. But the Chinese government did not realize that. Two Opium Wars and the defeat of the 1895 Sino-Japanese War severely shook the confidence of Chinese people, whether officials, scholars, or ordinary folks. Since then, Chinese people started the long journey of learning from western powers, first in science and technology, particularly manufacturing military weapons, then in copying political systems, and finally in introducing social sciences and arts. "Direct translation"—translation from foreign languages into the mother tongue—played the most important role in the process of borrowing from western civilizations (Beeby, 2004, p. 40). So it is safe to say military and economic weakness served as the root cause of the imbalance in translation between China and western cultures.

² “中国英语培训与就业形势发展研讨会”实录 (Recordings of the Symposium on English training and employment development). See <http://edu.sina.com.cn/1/2005-06-19/0441119022.html>.

³ Xue, Y. (2004). 中国传统必须通过西化才能复兴 (Chinese tradition can only revive through westernization). See <http://cul.sina.com.cn/p/2004-11-23/95579.html>.

But in the 21st century, when China has become one of the most dynamic economies in the world, why is China still on the receiving end in international communications, especially in cultural contacts with the advanced English speaking countries? There are several reasons that may justify this phenomenon.

At the per capita level, China's economy is not as strong as that of many advanced countries. In home-grown products, scientific innovation, social welfare, etc., China has a long way to go to become a leading country in the world. It is natural and very necessary for China to learn from other countries. Without international communications in every aspect, it is hard for China to develop itself all by its own efforts.

In terms of culture, despite its magnificent tradition, China has not tried its best to disseminate Chinese culture worldwide. To do this, China has to undertake "inverse translation"—translation from mother tongue to foreign languages—which means chiefly translation from Chinese to English at present (Beeby, 2004, p. 40). This task involves translation by two parties: English-speaking countries engaging in Chinese-English translation and Chinese people engaging in Chinese English translation. So far, Chinese-English translation has been insignificant, both in quality and quantity, compared with English-Chinese translation. This may be traced to two causes. On the one hand, China has not fully recovered its cultural confidence since the military defeats in the middle of the 19th century. Furthermore, China has not invested enough in doing translation from Chinese into foreign languages. On the other hand, advanced countries, with the U.S. and Britain as representatives, are not paying enough attention to learning from other cultures. Accordingly, these two powers are not translating much from foreign languages into English (direct translation), and among the less translated languages Chinese is one of the least translated languages (ZHU, 2004, p. 332).

In Britain, a lot of people believe in monolingualism. They think English is the international language, and there is no need to learn foreign languages. Wherever they go and whatever they do with international partners, they find they can get by in English. This fact further reinforced their monolingual belief (Barbour, 2004, p. 187). Therefore, only a few British people are interested in learning foreign languages and want to do translation from foreign languages into English.

In the United States, we have a similar situation. Foreign language learning is no longer popular in the USA. The average Americans believe that there is no longer any reason to teach their children any foreign languages. And Americans seem to consider it as an accomplished fact that English will be the universal language of communication. Also in American, more than half of all secondary pupils no longer study any foreign language at all (Maurais, 2003, p. 24).

The above facts told us that in major English-speaking countries a lot of ordinary people have lost the interest in learning foreign languages, so it is no wonder that there are few people who are enthusiastic about doing translation for which foreign language learning is undoubtedly a prerequisite. Therefore, for English-speaking people, the scant Chinese-English translation is a natural phenomenon, and there is no need to worry about that.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Imbalanced Translation

For China, it is very obvious to see the advantages and disadvantages of foreign-language learning and the imbalanced translation. Both the economic and cultural progresses of China depend on international communication and learning from other economies and cultures, which makes foreign-language learning and translation from foreign languages into Chinese very necessary and beneficial for the country. Meanwhile, too much emphasis on foreign-language learning and too much dependence on assimilation of foreign economic

and cultural elements through direct translation are also detrimental to Chinese economy and culture. For without economic innovation, a country may not be able to achieve sustainable development and may easily be influenced by international economic fluctuations. Similarly, without cherishing and developing one's cultural heritage, blindly copying foreign cultures may lead a nation to lose or weaken its cultural identity, which may be harmful to the diversification of world cultures.

Actually, Britain and America have also recognized the disadvantages of ignoring learning foreign languages and translation from foreign language into the mother tongue.

Stephen Barbour points out that monolingualism is detrimental to a culture for the following reasons: (1) People who know only one language appear poor in language learning; (2) People who know only their mother tongue seem less able to communicate with others, even in their own language; (3) People who know only the mother tongue are less able to communicate with international partners; and (4) "Much more seriously, for a monolingual, communication with speakers of other languages is dependent on the ability and willingness of the others to translate" (Barbour, 2004, p. 187). This way, monolinguals will come across a lot of difficulties in communicating with people from other cultures, for translation is seldom complete and absolute, and the translating process usually misses a lot of semantic nuances and possesses much temporary expediency in overcoming cultural barriers. Too much dependence on translation may lead to communicative failures.

For Americans, the September 11th event sounded an alarm for them in learning foreign languages, because it is said that they had failed to understand certain Arabic information to avoid the tragedy. Contrary to our assumption, the American government has always emphasized foreign language learning among students at various levels. In the document entitled *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*,

The American government as early as 1994 fixed as an objective an improvement in the teaching of foreign languages on all levels, and proposed that secondary schools should no longer graduate pupils without knowledge of a foreign language. Forty states passed laws to force public schools to offer at least a two-year course in foreign languages; 26% of colleges and universities made the knowledge of a second language a condition for entry and 35% a condition for graduating. (Maurais, 2003, p. 24)

However, the present situation shows that there is much to do for the American society to put their language policies into effect. Otherwise, they will continue to be short of foreign language learners and competent translators.

Conclusion

Seemingly, China is in a disadvantaged position in international communications, for we know that at present translation from foreign languages into Chinese far outweighs, both in quantity and quality, that from Chinese into foreign languages. However, if we look at the positive side of the translation imbalance, we may find that China is in a better position to learn from other cultures and may develop much faster than those cultures that are reluctant to learn foreign languages and translate from other cultures. A learning culture may be weak at present, but it will become stronger and stronger in the future. Equipped with the essence of various cultures, a culture is sure to embrace a bright future.

But there is still much we need to bear in mind while China is developing its own culture, especially when China is inheriting the essence of tradition. The imbalance in translation between China and western cultures does have negative effects, one of which is the less emphasis on traditional Chinese culture and the weakening enthusiasm among young people about traditional Chinese culture. This situation is not in the interest of

Chinese culture and also the diversification of world cultures. Therefore, Chinese people should pay much more attention to studying traditional Chinese culture and carry the essence of traditional Chinese culture forward to future generations. At the same time, Chinese people should devote much more resources to translating Chinese classics into English and other foreign languages, hopefully to address the translation imbalance in the near future. This way, traditional Chinese culture, and the present Chinese culture, will be able to not only survive, but also contribute to the diversification and prosperity of world cultures.

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