On Impacts of Cultural Soft Power on Translation
—by Analyzing Popularity of Yu Hua’s Works in US*

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With the emergence of the Cultural School in the 1990s, researchers began to deem that translation is inevitably associated with political tendencies and aspirations of social groups, and the relationship between source language and target language has never gone beyond politics and are always entangled with power. From political perspective, this thesis will take the popularity of Yu Hua’s works in US into account to analyze and explore how cultural soft power, has impacts on translation activities, especially translation direction and source text selection.

Keywords: cultural soft power, Yu Hua’s works, translation direction, source text selection

Introduction

In modern times, more importance is being attached to the cultural factors involved in translation studies because of the increasing frequency of cross-cultural communication. Thus, in the early 1990s, the study of translation has made a historical turn to a more grandeur sphere—culture. Translation theorists adopted the mode of cultural studies and introduced social, political and cultural factors outside literary system into translation studies. They firmly hold that translating is not going in a vacuum and translation problems could not be settled just by linguistic means. In addition to linguistic factors, translation is also influenced and manipulated by political factors. In this sense, translation is a kind of political action with cultural inclination rigged by ideology, poetics and patronage and it serves political purposes as well (Lefevere, 2004). Since then, more and more people in the field of translation set out to study the interaction between politics and translation.

Meanwhile, cultural globalization is an unavoidable trend of cultural development. Translation is known to be the transformation between two different systems of linguistic signs, but actually it is deeply involved in the influence of culture which is always ignored in traditional translation studies. Therefore, introducing cultural influence to translation studies seems necessary.

In the cultural exchanges between countries, the cultural soft power, an integrated part of comprehensive national strength, plays a key role in determining the power of cultural transmission of a country. So this paper aims at finding out how cultural soft power, a political term, influences translation, especially translation direction source text selection by analyzing the popularity of Yu Hua’s works in the United States. It is, thus, helpful to understand the feature and nature of translation and develop a new international political view of

* Acknowledgments: This paper is supported by Sichuan Foreign Languages and Literature Research Center in the name of “Manipulated Translation-Reception Research of Yu Hua in US” (Grant No. SCWYH17-15).
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translation studies as the complement to the politics of translation. More importantly, it is beneficial for each country to adopt cultural strategies and develop translation theories appropriate to it in cross-cultural exchanges, and recognize that translation also plays a role in enhancing cultural soft power.

**Previous Studies on Politics of Translation**

Traditionally, translation has been described as a comparative linguistic undertaking, whereby translation has been approached primarily from the perspective of the differences in language structures. However, this has turned out to be too narrow a view. Recently, the need for treating translation from a wide range of perspective has been recognized. Translation studies holds that the promise to step out of the former area of pure language into a much more profound and extensive realm in which a variety of discourses concerning politics, economy, society, culture and ideology are interacting influentially with translation theory and practice. Translators both home and abroad started to engage themselves in studying the interaction between translation and those out-textural factors, especially the political factors in translation.

English scholar Theo Hermans, first introduced the concept of Manipulation and raised the question “the politics of translation” in his book *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation* in 1985. It contains articles by various scholars, including a discussion of descriptive translation studies by Gideon Toury, the presentation of a model for the description of translations by José Lambert and Hendrik van Gorp, and an article by André Lefevere arguing that translation should be seen as a type of “rewriting”. This book concretely touched the power relationships presented by translation in different literary systems (Hermans, 1985). In 1992, Andre Lefevere improved his Manipulation Theory in *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, he points out that a social context is also viewed as being composed of systems, of which literature is one. This literary system possesses a dual control mechanism. One mechanism governs it largely from the outside, and defines the relations within the environment, where the key words are patronage and ideology. The other mechanism keeps order within the literary system, and the key terms are poetics and rewriters. He advocates that translation is manipulated by the ideology of translators or the authority, the poetics of target literature system and the patronage (Lefevere, 2010). In the year of 1993, Spivak contributed a lot to “the Politics of Translation” in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. She directs at the the proposition that translation is the appearing or looming power relations in the clash and the blending process of two different cultures, the subjective factors involved in the ability of the translator, identity, manipulation strategy and organization, the objective factors including media, publishers, periodicals, patron system, the translations as well as violence and appropriation levels in translation (Spivak, 2008). In 1998, Lawrence Venuti put forward “the cultural and political agenda of translation” in *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*. He noticed that besides government and other institutions which have explicit political intentions, some groups and social institutions also influence translation greatly. They may include all kinds of roles in total publishing industry. He gave prominence to publishers and editors, for they choose works, undertake the translation task, pay money to translators, and always control the translation methods (Munday, 2010).

In China, some translation researchers also commence to delve their research on extra-textual factors which influenced translation and focused on the political factor in translation. In 2003, a Shanghai scholar, Wang Xiaoming issued an article *Politics of Translation—A Glimpse of the Translation Activities in 1980s*. This article
could be regarded as the first article dealt with politics of translation in Main Land of China. He profoundly discussed the enlightenment role of translation in 1980s on thinking of whole society and people from three levels: dominant ideology, translator and patron (publishing house) (WANG, 2003). In 2005, Fei Xiaoping systematically sorted out different cultural collisions caused by translation and the evident or covert power relationships in cultural exchanges in his book *The Politics of Translation*. He gives some detailed implications for “the politics of translation”, such as deletion, addition, notes for original works, patron, official ideology, the concept of translator, etc. (FEI, 2005).

Although these books or papers made some attempts to explore the interaction between politics and translation from different perspectives, few essays directed their research at how cultural soft power, a key concept in international politics, has an impact on translation.

**Previous Studies on Translation of Yu Hua’s Works**

In 2012, a postgraduate paper *On English Translation of To Live* by Gong Yanping discussed English translation of *To Live* from a quite now perspective of Network propagation mode; in 2013, Li Ke’s paper called *The translation of avant-garde novels-Yu Hua’s Works* published in the journal of *Contemporary Foreign Language Studies*. The writer believes the personal interests of translators, literature responsibility of foreign editors and sinologists’ expectation towards social and cultural value of works make contributions to translation of Yu Hua’s works; in 2014, *Translation and Dissemination of Yu Hua’s Works in English-speaking Countries* by Li Hanzhe analyzed the success of Yu Hua’s works from four aspects: the capable translation team, original language style, unique themes. Almost all of these papers ignored the political factors which lead to the popularity of Yu Hua’s works in English-speaking countries.

**Cultural Soft Power and Translation**

Generally speaking, comprehensive national strength is the totality of the strengths that is closely related with a country’s existence and development and that a country possesses or controls in a given period of time (LIANG, 1994). In the early 1990s, the American scholar, Joseph. S. Nye, professor of Harvard University, first put forward the concept “soft power” in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. He pointed out that a country’s comprehensive national strength is composed of two kinds of powers: the hard power displayed by a country’s economic, technological, and military strength and the soft power reflected by a country’s cultural and ideological attraction (Joseph, 1990). Cultural soft power, the core element of soft power, refers to a national or regional cultural influence, cohesion and attraction. It plays an important role in elevating national soft power. It is also important for any country to improve its own cultural soft power while enhancing its own political, economic and military hard power. Hard power and soft power are both important, but in the information age, soft power is becoming more prominent than ever (Joseph, 1990, p. 13).

In the field of translation studies, scholars’ understanding of translation in its traditional sense has shifted along with the popularity and prosperous development of cultural studies in recent years. Translation is no longer regarded as merely a cross-linguistic activity but essentially cross-cultural communication. Wilss makes a significant step forward in this regard. His definition of translation takes into account the social environment in which translation is considered as a type of communicative behavior. He believes translation is the manifestation
of a dynamic interaction between all the source text author, the source text, the translator, the target text, the target text’s reader, and last but not least, the social environment in which the translator works. Seen in this light, translation is an activity with an intentional and a social dimension establishing links between a source language community and a target language community and therefore requiring a specific type of communicative behavior (Wilss, 1996). Mary Snell-Hornby defines translation as an interaction between two cultures instead of an activity taking place just between two languages in her book *Translation Studies: Toward an Integrated Approach* (Hornby, 2001). In China, Lu Jun puts it, “Generally speaking, translation is an activity of intercultural information transmission and exchange, which, by nature, is communication…” (LIU, 2007, p. 81). To sum up, translation is deeply rooted in the culture in which the language lives, so it can not be a pure linguistic act. Translation should be an intercultural or extracultural communication. In addition, as an interlingual and intercultural communication, translation is by nature kind of information transmission. Anyhow, translation itself can be seen as a kind of intercultural communication since it means communication taking place between two cultures. Susan Bassnett states in her essay that: “the study and practice of translation is inevitably an exploration of power relationships within textual practice that reflect power structures within the wider cultural context.” (Bassnett & Lefevere, 2001, p. 137). In fact, translation activities are far from being as pure and simple as being supposed. All kinds of social “power” strongly express themselves in different forms of discourses by penetrating into translation activities (LIU, 2007).

In conclusion, the cultural transmission power is part of the country’s comprehensive national strength in modern society, for it plays a special role in the maintenance, development and realization of national interests. The cultural soft power of a nation will determine the transmission power of its culture in the cross-cultural communications. So translation, as a way of cultural dissemination, is always inevitably influenced and limited by cultural soft power. Cultural soft power unavoidably affects translation activities, all the same, translation will help to promote cultural soft power, because in the context of economic globalization, cross-cultural communication becomes more active and frequent. We have gradually come to realize that the cultural exchanges have far-reaching impact on the elevation of national soft power, initiating the dialogue between nations, strengthening mutual understanding, trust and friendship between nations, are principal ways of demonstrating “soft power”.

Table 1

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<th><strong>Yu Hua’s Works in U.S</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
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<td><em>The Past and the Punishments: Eight Stories</em></td>
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<td><em>To live</em></td>
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<td><em>Chronicle of A Blood Merchant</em></td>
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<td><em>Cries in the Drizzle</em></td>
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<td><em>Brothers: A Novel</em></td>
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<td><em>China in Ten Words</em></td>
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<td><em>Boy in the Twilight: Stores of the Hidden China</em></td>
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<td><em>The Seventh Day</em></td>
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The statistics in Table 1 is adopted from Amazon website by the end of February 26th, 2018, since it is always updating. Besides Mo Yan, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2012, Yu Hua was one of the most acclaimed contemporary Chinese writers in the United States. From 1996 to 2016, eight works of Yu Hua were translated and published in US.

**Impact of Cultural Soft Power on Direction of Translation**

Direction of translation (Directionality) in translation studies usually refers to whether translators are working from a foreign language into their mother tongue or vice versa. The translation from translators’ foreign language into their mother tongue is called direct translation, whereas the translation from mother tongue into foreign language is called inverse translation or service translation (Baker, 2004). Ladmiral recognizes translation into the foreign language only as a pedagogical exercise to test performance in that language; from a professional point of view, he considers it an absurd requirement and a hopeless task (Baker, 1998). Similarly, Professor Newmark, a famous British translation theorist, put this in his book *A Textbook of Translation*: “Translating into your language of habitual use is the only way you can translate naturally and accurately and with maximum effectiveness” (Newmark, 2001, pp. 3-4). Nida also believes that the ideal translation should be translated into the native language (Nida, 2007). They assume that the practice in the translation process, only following the direct translation method, can achieve the best results. Directionality may be determined by the status of a language, the volume of translations into it, the availability of translators with specific language and the importance of a translation (Baker, 1998). Unequal status between two languages is the reflection of unbalance in politics, economics and military power between two cultures.

The translation from Chinese literature into English also triggered some discussions. Ma Yueran, a famous sinologist, one of the judges of Nobel Prize for literature, in the interview with Chinese reporters, said: “a Chinese, no matter how good his English, should not translate Chinese literature into English. Chinese literature should be translated into English by an Englishman who has a high literary cultivation, a good knowledge of their mother tongue, and know how to express better. It’s quite awful that some publishers are now employing the English learners to translate Chinese literature. Those people are liable to translating those works poorly. The works are ‘murdered’ in some way.” It is an undeniable fact that foreign sinologists maybe not as good as our own translators in the understanding of the original works, but they are skilled at the target language (their mother tongue). Their translation style will make their readers feel more approachable, so their translation can better win readers in their countries and markets. In Pan wenguo’s essay, *Translating—On the significance of Chinese translators in English translation of Chinese books*, he mentioned that A.C. Graham, a British sinologist once said that we can hardly leave translation to the Chinese, since there are few exceptions to the rule that translation is done into, not out of, one’s own language (PAN, 2004).

However, Samuel Huntington, a Harvard professor, well known for his book *Clashes of Civilization*, emphasizes that the hard power decides the soft power, and the hard power is the basis of the soft power. Material success will make a country’s ideology and culture more attractive, while the economical and military defeat will inevitably lead to cultural self-doubt and identity crisis. People will not be interested in a culture without any reason. People tend to be interested in the culture which can promote social development and economical prosperity. If people admire a country’s economical strength, they will admire its cultural values. With China’s
sustained and steady rise and development after adopting opening-up policy, Westerns are more and more interested in China and they want to know more about this potential competitor. In this circumstance, Yu Hua’s works attracted the scholars who are interested in China.

From Table 1, all eight Yu Hua’s works are translated by American translators who work in colleges. *To live* was translated by Michael Berry, an Associate Professor of the Department of Asian Languages & Cultures of UCLA College, University of California; *Cries in the Drizzle, China in Ten Words, The Boy in the Twilight,* and *the Seventh Day* are all translated by Allan Hepburn Barr, a Professor of Department of Asian Languages and Literature, Pomona College; Andrew F. Jones, an Associate Professor of East Asia Department of the University of California, Berkeley translated *Chronicle of A Blood Merchant* and *the Past and the Punishments;* while *Brothers* was co-translated by an immigrant from China who is Eileen Cheng-yin Chow, a Professor of Harvard University and Carlos Rojas, a Professor of Duke University. Those translators are all Associated Professors and Professors of American universities who can present the dominant poetics of America. They known China and Chinese quite well, in addition, they know how to decode the source language and put it into target language well. Their translation styles will make their readers feel more approachable. Undoubtedly their translations contribute to the popularity of Yu Hua’s works in the United States.

In summary, direction of translation will be unavoidably affected by the cultural soft power. Generally speaking, for a country, the stronger its comprehensive national strength is, the more direct translations will be made. The direct translation will make the translation more successful. However, for culturally less attractive countries, inverse translation is an expedient way to introduce their cultures to the outside world. Therefore, promoting cultural soft power to attract more foreigners to translate the works of developing countries is a feasible way to introduce their cultures to the outside world.

**Impact of Cultural Soft Power on Source Text Selection**

The translator’s tendency of source text selection is usually affected by both objective and subjective factors, the former includes the target readers, time, the political, economic and cultural relations, etc., the latter the translator’s view of culture, history, aesthetics, philosophy, literature as well as his educational background. The selection of source texts is the strictest and direct way which manipulates translation besides the text itself.

As discussed in the previous part, a country’s cultural soft power will determine its cultural transmission power; at the same time, cultural transmission power is the mirror of overall national strength. In other words, the political, economical relations of two countries will certainly determine their cultural positions. The strong or developed country is always associated with strong culture; yet the developing country usually goes with weak culture. In the cultural exchanges between strong culture and weak culture, source text selection, mostly comes from the strong culture, because the weak culture needs to learn more advanced science and technology or literary achievements, while the texts from the weak culture are mostly used to meet or cater to a particular need of the strong culture (LIU, 2005). In *Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Translation of Ideas,* Liu Miqing said:

> When we talk about translation, people will first think of literature translation, this idea is ‘western’. It seems that those westerners, especially American, just want to have knowledge of other people’s literature. All the same, more than 80 percent of their translation theories are about literature. (LIU, 2005, p. 2)
For instance, the Asian literature translated into Europe languages just satisfy those European curiosity and interests in oriental culture. Thus, when the translators of these developed countries select texts from developing countries, it is more likely for them to choose those texts which can meet some of the spiritual needs of the readers. For weak or developing countries, translation activities are often closely related with cultural strategy. Translation activities aim at enhancing the comprehensive national strength, or are submitted to national interests. Translators pay more attention to the practical use of translation. Translators in these countries, often tend to choose texts which deal with academic, science, technology, trade, etc., in order to learn the advanced experience, and promote their own national development.

All Yu Hua’s works translated and published in America are literature works. In fact, all of them are associated with some Chinese special backgrounds in which American are interested. Yu Hua was born in 1960s. His teens were exactly the days of the Cultural Revolution, so most of Yu’s work reflects this background. When Yu Hua started writing in the 1980s, he was labeled avant-garde writers. However, since the early 1990s, Yu Hua started his transformation and became a realist writer from avant-garde writers. Yu Hua describes the social reality of China in simple language, and Yu Hua’s popularity in the United States really started from this moment on. Such phrases in the those books as Chairman Mao, Cultural Revolution, economic reform, Chinese social reality, etc. will surely arouse westerners’ curiosity to this rising and confused eastern country.

The following are the brief introduction to the eight works from Amazon website. Some key words related with those themes are marked.

*The Past and the Punishment*, the first collection of short fiction by Yu Hua to appear in English, is about “On the Road at Eighteen, a young man finds out what life is truly like while walking down a deserted country road…. It takes us on a haunting and harrowing journey from classical China through the Cultural Revolution and into the new era of economic reform, exploding along the way our preconceived notions of what Chinese literature and culture are all about in the 1990s.”

*To live*, this searing novel, originally banned in China but later named one of that nation’s most influential books, portrays one man’s transformation from the spoiled son of a landlord to a kindhearted peasant. After squandering his family’s fortune in gambling dens and brothels, the young, deeply penitent Fugui settles down to do the honest work of a farmer. Forced by the Nationalist Army to leave behind his family, he witnesses the horrors and privations of the Civil War, only to return years.

*Brothers*, a bestseller in China, is an epic and wildly unhinged black comedy of modern Chinese society running amok. Here is China as we’ve never seen it before, in a sweeping, Rabelaisian panorama of forty years of rough-and-tumble Chinese history, from the madness of the Cultural Revolution to the equally rabid madness of extreme materialism…

*Chronicle of A Blood Merchant* is Yu Hua’s unflinching portrait of life under Chairman Mao… His visits become lethally frequent as he struggles to provide for his wife and three sons at the height of the Cultural Revolution. …

*Cries in the Drizzle* follows a young Chinese boy throughout his childhood and adolescence during the reign of Chairman Mao. …Yet Sun Guanglin’s status as an outcast, both at home and in his village, places him in a unique position to observe the changing nature of Chinese society, as social dynamics—and his very own family—are changed forever under Communist rule.

*China in Ten Words*, a unique, intimate look at the Chinese experience over the last several decades. Framed by ten phrases common in the Chinese vernacular, China in Ten Words uses personal stories and astute analysis to reveal as never before the world’s most populous yet oft-misunderstood nation. …In “Copycat,” he depicts the escalating trend of
piracy and imitation as a creative new form of revolutionary action. Witty, insightful, and courageous, this is a refreshing candid vision of the “Chinese miracle” and all of its consequences.

In the title story of The Boy in the Twilight, a shopkeeper confronts a child thief and punishes him without mercy… Taken together, these stories form a snapshot of a nation, lit with the deep feeling and ready humor that characterize its people.

The Seventh Day Yang Fei was born on a train as it raced across the Chinese countryside. Lost by his mother, adopted by a young switchman, raised with simplicity and love, he is utterly unprepared for the changes that await him and his country… Vivid, urgent, and panoramic, Yang Fei’s passage movingly traces the contours of his vast nation—its absurdities, its sorrows, and its soul.

Translators must take great consideration to the fate of their translation works and make a great effort to obtain a bright future for those works; therefore the best way for translators is to choose the “correct” source text which could meet the requirements of government and publishing organizations. Therefore, the translator would choose different texts for different motives and purposes in different historical periods. In conclusion, there are a few factors which will influence the translator when he starts to select a text for translation, but cultural soft power is always an important one; translators of strong countries tend to take spiritual needs into consideration when they choose what they will translate, whereas translators of weak countries always choose some scientific, technological, academic works to be translated to enhance their countries’ comprehensive national strength.

Conclusion

After the cultural turn in translation studies, translation is no longer taken as a phenomenon happening in a vacuum. In fact, it exists in reality with concrete social and historical context. Translation process is a complicated one, involving a lot of choices, and the choices in translation process and the purpose of translation behavior are all under the influence and constraint of a variety of factors beyond texts.

From political perspective, this paper shed some light on translation studies with regard to influence of cultural soft power on translation to explain why Yu Hua’s works are popular in the United States. Thus, after the close study of the interaction between translation and cultural soft power, the present paper obtains the following conclusion: Firstly, the ideal translation direction, direct translation will be conductive to the success of Yu Hua’s works in the United States, while the directionality will be determined by cultural soft power. Secondly, cultural soft power has an impact on source text selection. The developed country tends to choose something to just satisfy their spiritual needs. Yu Hua’s works on Cultural Revolution and social problems after adopting opening-up policy surely will satisfy the curiosity of westerners.

Researching from the point of view of international politics is a new perspective. Through this perspective, scholars of translation studies could find out the interaction between translation and cultural soft power. Besides the impacts and constraints of cultural soft power on translation, comprehensive national strength which includes cultural soft power is also the foundation and backing force for translation. Moreover, translation is necessary to enhance cultural soft power, for nowadays, translation, which is playing a key role in promoting the development of politics, economy, culture, science, technology and trade in all countries, has permeated in most of, not to say all, the aspects of society. Translation should not be the hinder but propulsion in promoting comprehensive national strength. We need to learn more about the political influence on translation. The more we know, the more we shall be able to evaluate translation practices in a more objective way. The political view in translation
proposed in this paper is a preliminary research that may benefit translation is a field that needs further researches by translators and translation theorists in the years to come.

References


