

Cultural Translation Enabling a Dialogue between West and East

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Translations are not only a way of communication; they are not only connected with linguistic competence, but with intertextuality, psychological, and narrative competence, being a cultural vector, a facilitator of cross-cultural cooperation. It has to be clearly acknowledged that translation functions not just as a trans-lingual vector of meaning but also as a vector of cultural specificity. For it is only through translations that elements of one culture become available to another culture. When Chinese literature ‘travels abroad’, it does it mainly in the form of translated literature. In this case, culture operates largely through the translational activity. Chinese literature bears significant cultural heterogeneities that are not shared by other cultures or at least may be easily misunderstood by receivers of a different culture. So, there is no longer only the case of translation of the work, but also the case of the translatability of the culture.

The present research paper aims to contribute to our understanding of the importance and influence of the cultural sub-strata of language and translation in managing nowadays cross-cultural issues.

Keywords: cultural translation, literary representation of China, literature reception



Cultural Translations as a Bridge between Societies

‘The cultural turn’ – term introduced in 1990 by Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevre in their study ‘Translation, History and Culture’ soon became the key term in translation studies. It refers to the ‘move towards the analysis of translation from a cultural studies angle’ which determines ‘the move from translation as text to translation as culture and politics’ (Bassnett, 1990, p.19-20).

Therefore the analysis of the cultural, historical context of the tradition from which the original work was born is the pillar of the cultural approach to literary

translations. The study and the examination of these historical and cultural factors help at the determination of the fidelity of the translation process. Gentzel (1998) remarked that the term introduced by Bassnett and Lefevre gave birth to ‘an explosion of events’ in the field of translation studies, pushing strongly the borders of translation study towards cultural studies, where the cultural interaction, more than the translation is the major study focus (Gentzler, 1998, p. ix-xxii).

Also in 1980 the German linguist Hans Vermeer introduced the Purpose Theory (Skopostheorie), which was later developed by C. Nord (1991) and which emphasises that Purpose (the use) of the target



Susan Bassnett

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text is the most important criteria for the decision making process of the translator, as it determines the entire process of the translation; and the necessity of the faithfulness between the source text and the target text is always subordinated to the Purpose (the human interaction). Similarly, Lefevre considers the translation as a way of 'rewriting' of the original text, among others such as historiography, criticism and editing, all of which adapt and 'manipulate' the original text in a manner that usually 'makes them suit one the of current ideological trends of the time' (1992, p.8-9).

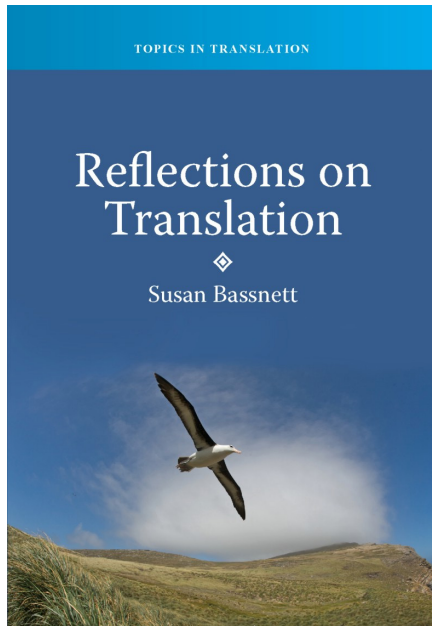
Two opposing translation strategies are available for the translator to consider: the source culture-oriented translation strategy (known in Chinese as *yihua* 异化 alienation or foreignization strategy) over the receptor-culture-oriented strategy (known in Chinese as *guihua* 归化 adaptation or domestication strategy). And there are strong advocates for either of the two strategies. (1) Lawrence Venuti is an advocate

for the source-culture-oriented translation strategy. He stresses the importance of the translator bringing out the cultural difference of the source culture from the target culture and argues that "resistant translation" has to be used as a strategy so that the intended reader can realize the existence of such difference in people's "cultural schema" and understand it through the process of reading the translated text (see Venuti 1992: 12-13). (2) Nida, on the contrary, upholds the receptor-culture oriented strategy. His "functional equivalence" concept suggests that it is the translator's responsibility to make the source-cultural information in the source text understandable to the targeted reader in the target-cultural context, and he puts forth the "functional isomorphs" as a solution (see Nida 1964a: 159 and 1993: 121).

Cultural studies and translation studies have become complementary and they are close related to each other. Translation studies turned into a significant milestone in the cultural identity of a society, its values in the culture being recognized and acknowledged. L. Venuti has named translations as having the power to form the identity of a society - "this ability of translations to participate, according to the necessity, both in ensuring culture's coherence or homogeneity as well as in activating cultural resistance or culture's innovation processes" (Venuti, 1998).

The research of translations from a cultural point of view and their reception in a literature - in the case of the present paper the reception of the Romanian translation of Chinese literature in Romanian literature - constitutes a crucial element in the adequate understanding and correct appreciation of the broad phenomenon of reception of a literature in another literature. In the process of reception of the Chinese texts, the role, importance and indisputable value of the translation cannot possible be negated, underestimated or ignored, because it constitutes the most efficient way to get in contact with the work of a foreign writer. Therefore, the impact and reception of Romanian translations of Chinese literature need to be correctly evaluate and approached from a broad and modern perspective which studies the effects from all the perspectives – literary, linguistic, cultural, social, economic and political.

In the era of globalization, when the tendency to change and develop is inevitable, the necessity of contact and international collaboration became bigger than ever. No culture ever existed without being the result of cultural development and change, and the most obvious source of change is the impact and inter-relationship with another country. Although, there is a need for a complex and exigent process before surpassing the barriers between east and west, those obstacles are not unconquerable. The more frequent contact and the continuous efforts bring a significant



input to the ease of the understanding of the cultural and ideological differences between these two worlds – the Asian and European ones.

Throughout this paper, I focused on translation as mediator between cultures, trying to prove that transitions are embodied in the culture of a country and that through translations we are capable of understanding the socio-cultural context of a nation. This allows different actors of the world stage to understand other's culture and to experience the world they live in. Culture operates largely through translational activity, since only by the acceptance of new texts into culture can any society experience innovation as well as maintain its uniqueness. Only through translators the creative diversity of human kind can get global acceptance and can become a seed into another linguistics area and another receiving culture.

The study case will discuss the reception of recent Chinese texts in the Western world, especially in Romania. What brings particular value to this choice is that, more than any other texts, when Chinese literature 'travels abroad', it does so mainly in the form of translated literature. Translation is perhaps the most important dimension of the recent Chinese literature's global acceptance. The perfect example, in this direction, is the Nobel Prize awarded - Mo Yan, the first Chinese citizen of mainland China to receive it. It is widely accepted that the Nobel Prize in this case was a team work between Mo Yan and his English translator – Howard Goldblatt- as many critics said that the international translations of Mo Yan's work played a crucial role in the decision, the committee members reading his novels in several languages but with one exception, the original Chinese version.

Translation – Cultural Vector Not Just a Means of Communication

Acknowledging the importance of language and literature a Xinhua commentary argues that "Economic power alone cannot make a country respected. As the nation is now seeking a rejuvenation of its ancient greatness, it is time for Chinese culture, including literature and arts, to catch up" (Peng, 2014). A clear example is that nowadays, Chinese authors are more popular than ever before. Mo Yan is one native Chinese writer who has made it to the hall of fame in world literature. The win makes Mo Yan the most translated living Chinese writer. The benefits from the translation of his work is indispensable to the concept of world literature: "World literature is writing that gains in translation" (Damrosch, 2003).

Another example is 长恨歌 (The Song of Everlasting Sorrow) written by the contemporary Chinese writer Anyi Wang in 2008 and published by Columbia University Press. It was praised from the beginning and became a masterpiece worldwide soon, being nominated on the Man Booker International Prize in 2011.

Chinese humanities and the study of literature have acquired new dimension, especially in various fields such as translation studies, translation itself or literary theory. This development is also tied to the image that China wants to promote internationally. In this respect, the best illustration of the importance given to the promotion of Chinese culture and literature outside of China is creation of an online tool - the Global Database Resource on Chinese Culture (中国文化海外传播动态数据库, founded in 2010) - a project co-established by the "National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science of China" and Beijing Foreign Studies University. This enormous database collects and stores information of Chinese cultural and literature events, publications, press releases etc. outside of China.

The educational project funded by the Ministry of Education in P.R. of China - 英语世界中国文学的译介与研究 (Research on the Translation and Study of Chinese Literature in the Anglophone World) is another example of 'investment' in the increased global awareness that Chinese literature wants to gain.

These two mechanisms are sustainable manners of measuring the direct and tangible effects of China's soft power policy.

Culture is inseparable from the activity of translation. Whether a culture is translatable or not can influence its acceptance worldwide, as the cultural specificity of a society is influenced by the translation activities into other cultures. Through translations, the cultural patrimony experiences innovation and uniqueness. This is also known as domestication



and foreignization, processes of assimilation or non-assimilation of a translated work. In China, foreignization or Westernization is easily accepted; therefore, the Chinese recent works can be highly influenced by the Western style, whereas –due to the dominance of Western literature- in European and American cultures domestication is still dominant.

Chinese literature bears significant cultural heterogeneities that are not shared by other cultures or at least may be easily misunderstood by receivers of a different culture. So, there is no longer only the case of translation of the work, but also the case of the translatability of the culture. Thus, what the Western reader receives is not a linguistic translation per se, but a cross- cultural translation.

Aside from the barrier of linguistic nature, owing to cultural differences, Chinese literature definitely meets cultural filters when entering the West. According to prof. Shunqing Cao from Sichuan University, “cultural filtering refers to the mechanism of selection, transformation, appropriation, and infiltration of culture-specific norms in a specific cultural context or tradition” (Cao, 2015). Since one is born and raised in a specific location and period, cultural “luggage” nurtured in a social-historical context brands each individual accordingly to his/her mother-culture. Moreover, the translator’s ability to understand the source language and source text and his/ her knowledge and understanding of the cultural tradition may decide the selection of manner of translation, which, in some sense, will ultimately decide the reception of a literary work in the target culture. This liberty may unfortunately lead sometimes to literary misreading. Besides this, the translation or interpretation of a foreign literary work is interfered with what Hans-Georg Gadamer called ‘prejudice’, which according to him, is “not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that interpreted they inevitably distort the truth ... In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices ... are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us” (Gadamer, 1976). Thus, the reception of a Chinese literary work is pursuant to several factors varying from linguistic one, literary ones to cultural prejudices.

The cultural and linguistic factors were, probably, the main border that the translators had to pass in order to make modern Chinese literature known on the international market. Translators like Howard Goldblatt (Mo Yan’s translator in English) made gargantuan effort to raise global awareness of the Chinese literature. Fortunately, nowadays an increasing number of contemporary writers attract talented translators for their work. Mo Yan is the pioneering writer of the new generation, who due to his talent and attractiveness became the most renowned

contemporary Chinese writer. Alongside, China is the lucky motherland for devoted and creative writers like Ouyang Jianghe, Yan Lianke, Su Tong, Yu Hua, Zhang Wei, Zhai Yongming, Yu Jian, Xi Chuan, Wang Anyi,

University of Oxford lecturer in modern Chinese literature Margaret Hillenbrand says: “The obvious reason for the growing global presence of Chinese literature is the growing global presence of China itself.” People have come to realize that there is a serious knowledge deficit between China and its international counterparts - in particular. “China knows incomparably more about Europe and America than the other way around - and reading Chinese literature is an effective, intuitive means of remedying that gap [...] And if the world is coming to Chinese literature, some might say that Chinese literature has taken steps toward the world, too” (Chunyan, 2012).

In recent years, she says, “Chinese writers such as Wei Hui, Yu Hua, Yan Lianke - and, of course, Mo Yan himself - have produced work that resonates more with international audiences than works from earlier periods. Meanwhile, the notion of so-called ‘world literature’ - the idea that works of literature can move beyond their origins and circulate globally - has gained academic currency.” This will likely lead to more Chinese literature appearing in bookstores, libraries and university curricula, she says.

Recent Reception of Chinese Literature in Romania

Slowly, but surely, the internet and bookshops start to show evidence of the presence of Chinese texts in Romania. In the last half of the century, the interest for the study of Chinese language and literature was reawakened, and consequently the Chinese literature in Romania gained considerable recognition and attention.

The recent reception of Chinese literature in Romania has two main dimensions, one in terms of the cultural reception and the other one of linguistics reception. As China is becoming an important player on the world stage, Chinese literature is poised to change and reshape the overlapping, shared cultural landscapes in the world. The series of Chinese books published at Romanian publishing houses reconsider Chinese literature, culture, criticism, and aesthetics in national and international contexts.

Imbued with a desire for mutual relevance and sympathy, the recent translations of Chinese works in Romanian seek to render China’s heritage and modern accomplishments into a significant part of world culture. The international prizes represent one of the first steps in the well-deserved recognition of the importance of Chinese literature or the entire world culture. The general opinion about the significance

of the Nobel granted to Mo Yan is that it does not acknowledge only the writing talent of Mo Yan, but it also recognizes the importance of all the Chinese writers, too little present in the world literature. It also proves that the cultural dialog is indeed possible and that the contemporary reader grants more trust to China, overcoming the old-fashioned orientalist reception, and shows more interest in the values of Chinese culture. The award acted as a huge boost to China's national psyche, which has long suffered from a sense of cultural inferiority, as its cultural accomplishments, at least in the eyes of the West, are overshadowed by its economic accomplishments. "This will be embraced as an indicator that China has arrived in the world", said Kenneth G. Lieberthal, a China expert at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

It is crucial, thus, for the correct reception of a work to have a translator who truly understands and transfers to the target audience what the author really meant. In this regard, Romanian readers have been very fortunate to have native translators who, through diligent work of many years, managed to translate exquisitely contemporary Chinese literature and thus giving Romanians the opportunity to taste a piece of a literature which was almost secluded from the foreign eye. The translations of Chinese literature in Romanian are the proof that the cultural barriers can be overcome. The extraordinary work that the Romanian sinologists and translators did made possible the access of foreign reader and brought recent Chinese literature into the attention of literary critics, who are very sensible to the cultural specificity.

Concluding remarks

The present research paper aims to contribute to our understanding of the importance and influence of the cultural sub-strata of language and translation in managing nowadays cross-cultural issues. Translation is indeed the bridge, the vector, which brings knowledge, customs, ideas and experiences from one society into another, creating a global stage available to anyone, regardless of their mother-language. Language is the one that mediates our experiences and carry our identity, values and worldviews.

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