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VARIATION IN TRANSLATION AND THE FORMATION OF WORLD LITERATURE

La variación en la traducción y la formación de la literatura mundial

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ABSTRACT: Translation is a process of linguistic transformation in which variation is inevitable. And as an act of interpretation, it in essence does not have an absolute criterion: hence creative treason, by virtue of the openness of interpretation, is a phenomenon that attracts comparatists. World literature has been defined as translated literature in circulation, as has been widely acknowledged by many scholars in both the East and the West. In other words, no translation, no world literature. But we can go further, saying that world literature is literature with variation in translation. Without variation, translated literature remains within the boundaries of a local literature. Only by respecting

cultural heterogeneity and actively making cultures blend and overlap can translated literature be on the way to becoming world literature.

Key words: creative treason; Domestic Appropriation; Untranslatability; Variation in Translation; World Literature.

RESUMEN: La traducción es un proceso de transformación lingüística en el que la variación es inevitable. Y, como acto de interpretación, en el fondo no tiene un criterio absoluto; de ahí que la traición creativa, en virtud de la apertura interpretativa, sea un fenómeno que atraiga a los comparatistas. La literatura mundial ha sido definida como literatura traducida en circulación tal y como ha sido reconocida por numerosos investigadores en Oriente y Occidente. En otras palabras, si no hay traducción, no hay literatura mundial. Pero podemos ir más allá y decir que la literatura mundial es literatura con variación en traducción. Sin variación, la literatura traducida permanece dentro de los límites de la literatura local. Solo al respetar la heterogeneidad cultural y hacer activamente que las culturas se mezclen y solapen puede la literatura traducida dirigirse hacia la literatura mundial.

Palabras clave: traición creativa; apropiación doméstica; intraducibilidad; variación en traducción; literatura mundial.

1. TRANSLATION AS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

Translation is no longer simply taken as a linguistic transformation, but has to be seen as a dialogue between cultures. When a text is read by people from different cultural backgrounds, it is actually interpreted in different ways. Hence, misreading is inevitable, and it is interesting to see how a text can be accepted between cultural contexts. In essence, creative treason is a kind of translation which is not quite faithful to the original text; it is a distortion of the original by adding, diminishing or changing information in the translating process in order to adapt to a new context. Therefore, the treason does not totally betray the meaning of the text but attempts to find reasonable ways to adjust it to the appetite of the target reader.

2. HETEROGENEITY AND UNTRANSLATABILITY

Heterogeneity has been a focus in academia since we entered into the age of globalization. When talking about cross-cultural communication or

dialogue, one notices that differences between cultures/civilizations are far more important than sameness. Samuel Huntington (1996, 41) claimed that:

Civilization and culture both refer to the overall way of life of a people, and a civilization is a culture writ large. They both involve the values, norms, institutions, and modes of thinking to which successive generations in a given society have attached primary importance.

A civilization is the broadest cultural entity. Therefore, if a cultural entity is a big home where all the members share the same tradition, then a civilization should be a bigger home, inside which all cultures share something based on a long history. Dwelling together in the same geographical location, people have got roughly the same religious beliefs, life habits and cultural traditions; they have a distinctive medium for exchanging ideas which, to Martin Heidegger, is language. Heidegger's well-known saying holds, that «language is the house of Being» (Heidegger 1971, 5). As language is ineradicably social, it is a basic building block of human existence. «If man by virtue of his language dwells within the claim and call of Being, then we Europeans presumably dwell in an entirely different house than Eastasian man [...] And so, a dialogue from house to house remain nearly impossible», Heidegger (1971, 5) claims. The dialogue from house to house is exciting, but Heidegger doubted that a dialogue between heterogeneous cultures would be realistic, inasmuch as ideas have to cross maybe insurmountable barriers.

Translation is actually an attempt to convey information from house to house; it is a process in which two cultural traditions establish a dialogue. When two languages meet in a process of mutual transformation, they will communicate with each other. The translator acts as a mediator to help cross borders. Although it may be difficult to interpret an idea for somebody without any loss, the attempt is necessary and important. We know that there is no complete equivalence in translation, but we have to come close to it. For example, the American poet Robert Frost held that poetry is what is lost in translation. Roman Jakobson also discussed the translation of poetry. He realized that:

Syntactic and morphological categories, roots, and affixes, phonemes and their components (distinctive features) –in short, any constituents of the verbal code– are confronted, juxtaposed, brought into contiguous relation according to the principle of similarity and contrast and carry their own autonomous signification. (Jakobson 2000, 118)

The translator will have to face the conversion of paronomasia from one language to another and seeking an expression which perfectly

corresponds to the expression in another language is often impossible, which causes problems for the translator and makes poetry untranslatable. According to the scholar Yan Fu (1981, xi), the difficulties of translation lie respectively in faithfulness, fluency and elegance. How can it be possible for all translations to meet the requirement set by this standard? Therefore, many translators choose to give up some translations, and regard those who try hard in various ways to overcome untranslatability as betrayers of the original. Sure, the author might have or have not intended to fix a meaning at the time of writing, but his text can be translated and variously interpreted just like any other. In the light of hermeneutics, the meaning of a literary work is never exhausted by the individual intentions of its author, and the reader must take into account the cultural context of meaning at the time when the text was produced. Gadamer elaborates in *Truth and Method* that a literary text requires understanding of the context of its origin in the dialogue with the present context of the reader, and this kind of understanding has to be acquired. He even stated that «aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics» (Gadamer 2004, 157) in the sense of dialogue, because understanding gives hermeneutical consciousness a comprehensiveness that surpasses that of aesthetic consciousness. In the circulation of work from one cultural or historical context to another, one cannot stop the work being invested with new meanings, or interpreted in various ways.

With strict standards for the evaluation of translation, untranslatability has its theoretical legitimacy, but this is not entirely so in practice. Translators have their own subjectivity; after examining the original text, they interpret what they have comprehended. In other words, translation is rewriting based on the original; it is the «second original». The writer gives meaning to the original text, while translators express the meanings in the target text. Target readers are able to know the general content of the original, but the story is retold by the translator in his own way. In short, there is no absolutely untranslatable text. A text might be untranslatable at the moment only because it has not come across a sufficiently creative translator.

3. LEGITIMACY OF CREATIVE TREASON

Untranslatability does not mean a cancellation of translation. On the contrary, it reveals the difficulty of translation and calls for creative transformation between two cultures. In this way, variation in translation, or creative treason, is inevitable.

The study of creative treason is significant because it concentrates on the issues of blockage, collision, misunderstanding, and distortion which occur in the communication between different cultures. [...] Without creative treason, there is no possibility for literature to be transmitted and accepted. (Cao 2013, 134-135)

In the past, many scholars who devoted themselves to translation studies have delved into defining translation in different ways. When they realize that acquiring absolute faithfulness is not possible in practice, they try to meditate by coming up with dynamic equivalence. Eugene Nida gave priority to dynamic equivalence over formal equivalence. He demonstrated that «to measure dynamic equivalence we can only rightly compare the equivalence of response, rather than the degree of agreement between the original source and the later receptors» (Nida and Taber 1982, 23). Translation does not have to strictly follow the linguistic form of the original text, and what a competent translator needs is the judgement to see what kind of translation different types of audience would like to read. Thus the status of translator is elevated, and translation is more target reader-oriented.

While we consider what kind of translation is a good one and set up various rules and criteria to evaluate it, we simply admit that some original texts are difficult to translate, and even struggle with a degree of untranslatability. However, to differentiate a good translation from a bad translation does not rely on absolute criteria that satisfy every evaluator. Walter Benjamin (2000, 15) said the essential quality of a text is not a statement or the transfer of information, «yet any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information-hence, something essential. This is the hallmark of bad translations». Language is a carrier of meaning: thus a good translator should not persistently demand literalness in relation to the original. Benjamin did not agree that translations had to be literally faithful to their original. On the contrary, he said, «a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language» (Benjamin 2000, 21). Another remarkable scholar who was preoccupied with linguistic transformation is Roman Jakobson. He defined interlingual translation, or translation proper, as an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language; he admitted that «there is ordinarily no full equivalence between code-units, while messages may serve as adequate interpretations of alien code-units or messages» (Jakobson 2000, 114). Translation is the process of recoding and transmitting a message from another source. «Thus translation involves two equivalent messages in two different codes» (Jakobson 2000, 114). Jakobson upgraded the

interpreter's status by pointing out that the interpreter is the bridge which fills the gap between two messages. Moreover, when the interpreter tries to do the translation, he or she has to compare two languages, which implies an examination of their mutual translatability. When a text is untranslatable at a given moment, only creative transformation is possible.

Yan Fu's triple principle of translation from experience has for a long time been cherished as a golden rule for translation by Chinese scholars. However, after careful examination, one will mostly find that the meaning of a text is not fixed at all: how, then, to judge whether a translator has been strictly faithful? This kind of difficulty, in Jakobson's eyes, is not inherent in the texts, but stems from the looseness given to meanings in translations. Because of the plurality of languages, translations are called for, and the text will unconditionally be translatable. Translation studies today are more and more affiliated with cultural study; translation is a linguistic transformation on the one hand and, on the other hand, more of a cultural interpretation. Translation is the sum of the creative efforts made when reproducing the original, to which translators, target readers and the accepting environment all contribute. When translation is adopted as an act of interpretation, any reasonable translation is a legitimate elucidation of a text. By «reasonable» we mean here that the translation is a form of cultural interpretation but also emphasize that there is some degree of validity in the interpretation. Not all cross-cultural interpretations are translations. Only those limited to interpretation and representation based on the original text can be called translation. Just as Wang Ning (2014, 49) argued:

Because translation is a kind of interlingual as well as cross-cultural interpretation, it remains a limited interpretation, and any undue interpretation is not a proper translation. The former is constrained by the original text, while the latter is endowed with relatively more power and space.

In short, creative treason encourages a translation that takes cultural elements into consideration; it gets its legitimacy by referring reasonably to the original text in the process of interlingual and cross-cultural interpretation.

4. NO VARIATION IN TRANSLATION, NO FORMATION OF WORLD LITERATURE

A literary work would fall under the heading of world literature on condition that it is translated and circulated in other nations outside its place of origin. Because of the heterogeneity among cultures and civilizations, translation is only feasible when creatively interpreting the original text within the linguistic and even cultural codes of the target language. Therefore, in

the process of translation and reception, no literature is free from variation at different levels. Variation will always happen in translation, but it does not make the translation a bad one because a responsible translator, on the premise of a good understanding of the original text, creatively betrays it only when he fails to find complete linguistic equivalences, and strives to interpret and adapt it in order to adjust it to the new situation or context in the target language. Only if there is variation in translation is the formation of world literature available. Variation in translation is a joint effect of discursive codes which represent themselves at the level of language, culture and civilization. Just like the value of comparability of difference, variation reveals cultural heterogeneity beneath the surface of linguistic transformation which expands the meaning of comparability and gives a new vision for the study of comparative literature and world literature.

5. WORLD LITERATURE AS A TRANSLATIONAL CIRCULATION

As world literature is a mode of circulation and reading, a given work can enter into world literature only after it is circulated and read by people beyond its culture of origin, no matter if it remains in its original language or has been transformed to other foreign languages. Whether a literary work gets a reputation as a world literary classic or not is determined by its evaluation by readers all over the world instead of a certain group of literary scholars. However, a literary work is read in the space of a foreign culture most of the time as a translated text. Few people will possess sufficiently high proficiency in multiple foreign languages in their limited life to do otherwise: to master a foreign language well is a time- and energy-consuming work. For example, although English has become the most widely used foreign language in China, and more and more students take English as their major in college, only about forty per cent of the English major students can pass the TEM-8 (Test for English Majors Band 8), and the percentage of those who are skilled in reading and writing is smaller. The current situation shows that both common and advanced readers mostly have access to the enjoyment of literature in foreign languages in translation. Without translation, there is hardly a circulation of world literature.

The importance of translation in the formation of world literature is a matter-of-course. In his 1923 article «The Task of the Translator» Walter Benjamin proposed a meaningful point, «For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life» (Benjamin 2000, 16). Generally, the

life of a literary work lies in its circulation over a long history and within a larger geographical space; and a translation is meant for readers who do not know the language of the original. The work of a translator enables target readers to gain access to the original, which will be read and discussed by more people. In other words, translation is the extended life of the original, and the source text therefore has a second life in the target language context. Similarly, world literature in itself is a travelling concept rather than a fixed phenomenon. In its travelling process, translation plays a role as intermediary. With the help of translation, some literary works are no longer marginalized in other cultures and literary traditions.

David Damrosch (2003, 281) defined world literature as «literature that gains in translation» and «a mode of reading» which has found a resonance with many scholars. But there are some opposing opinions. In her counter-move book *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, Emily Apter invokes untranslatability as a deflationary gesture towards the expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literary endeavours. To Apter, a recognition of the «world» in world literature as both politically and linguistically flawed is needed; she borrows Heidegger's affirmation that the concept of world «means the accessibility of beings as such rather than beings in themselves» (Apter 2013, 17). She mentions Damrosch's book *What is World Literature?*, in which one of the core points is that an important criterion for world literature's worldliness lies in a text's translational circulation. She aims to test the hypothesis that translation and untranslatability are constitutive of some forms of world literature. However, the result is that we have to face several types of heterogeneity: for literary studies more broadly, the endeavour to conjugate

linguistic relativism with subjective truth; logology with matheme; the unconscious with logics of worlds; deterritorialized languages with the genius of language in one tongue [...] has involved an effort to relate linguistic pluralism (inherent in translation as a liberal art) to a practice of *Weltliteratur* that takes full measure of linguistic constraints and truth conditions in the investigation of singular modes of existing in the world's languages. (Apter 2013, 32)

Apter sides against world literature by holding that not all literatures are translatable, and thus circulation of literature might not be possible. Apter's standpoint has drawn attention from Damrosch, who respects Apter's contribution but does not agree with her. Damrosch (2014, 504), in his book review on *Against World Literature*, thinks Apter «aims to complicate these matters, both linguistically and politically». Though Apter's primary concern is with rifts within the field of theory itself, she «views continental philosophy itself through a selective lens» (Damrosch 2014,

508). It seems to Damrosch that she does not really need to make a forceful case to understand the «world» in world literature as both politically and linguistically flawed. Damrosch also criticizes Apter's study by checking the list of books she discusses: he notes that Apter has neglected major figures whose work could enrich her argument at many points. Damrosch modestly suggests expanding the scope of comparative literature in the West by turning eyes towards the large and differentiated world beyond the West. He appreciates Apter's study in that the tough linguistic and political analysis that she

rightly wishes comparatists to pursue will best be carried forward by widening our cultural and linguistic horizons, and by employing the full variety of critical and theoretical approaches that can be included in our cartographic toolboxes today. (Damrosch 2014, 508)

In spite of some dissenting voices, research in world literature ought to be particularly focused on translation. Unlike technical translation, which implies little or no effective change in meaning, literary translation does not require absolute accuracy, and often either gains or loses both information and meaning. Every time a literary text is translated into another language, it has to strike a balance between gain and loss. As translation implies a process that includes misreading and distortion, it will also bring about something unexpected. François Jullien believes that it is not translation's destiny to be a treason to the original; on the contrary, «translation virtually aims to clarify what are the possibilities that have been closed in the process of transformation from one language framework to another, and that have been unlocked or revealed from translation» (Jullien 2014, 123). Thus translation offers us a chance of self-reflection and installs a threshold between the inner and outer space by which access to the world of another language can be achieved. «Works become world literature when they gain on balance in translation, stylistic losses offset by an expansion in depth as they increase their range», Damrosch (2003, 289) argues. Both literary works and literary theories are eager to be translated, read and interpreted, and that's where their universality of value and significance lies. The more frequently a text is interpreted, the stronger its vitality will be; or, more precisely, the charm of translation lies in the possibility and expansion in depth that have not yet been unfolded. Just as Jonathan Culler (1992, 110) said, moderate translations have little impact, while some extreme translations «have a better chance, it seems to me, of bringing to light connections or implications not previously noticed or reflected on than if they strive to remain «sound' or moderate». Translators who are creative in their thinking are able to reveal what the original text has concealed and repressed, and they even enable criticism to be more

interesting by asking not what it has in mind but what it forgets, not what it says but what it takes for granted.

In this way, world literature as a translational circulation means that translation is not only a tool for a work to be introduced out of its original linguistic context, but also a threshold which provides access to intercultural communication through presenting various interpretations of literature.

6. THE IMPORTANCE OF VARIATION IN TRANSLATION

Cultural heterogeneity makes interlingual transformation of a literary text difficult. However, translation as a kind of cultural interpretation has been proved to be reasonable, and thus creative treason gains its legitimacy, especially in the circulation of world literature. Here we emphasize variation in translation and its important significance for the formation of world literature to indicate that variation is inevitable in the process of literary translation, and therefore it is through variation that literature gains in the translational circulation of world literature. Roughly speaking, the impact of variation in translation on the formation of world literature can be analysed from two sides: one is the relationship between interlingual variation and variation at other levels; the other is the outcome of interlingual variation itself.

In the book *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* (Cao 2013), Cao has classified variation into four types at different levels, namely cross-national variation, interlingual variation, intercultural variation and cross-civilization variation, among which interlingual variation is a red line that runs through the other three types. As we know, on the linguistic level, translation by nature is a representing or reproducing process from one language to another. If the translator wants his translation to be accepted in the target language context, he has to follow the codes of the target language and take the target reader's reading habit into consideration, which will surely result in a gap between the original text and the translated text. Where the gap is, variation happens, and not necessarily to the detriment of the original text.

As for the relationship between interlingual variation and variation at the other three levels, it can generally be seen from the following points of view. Firstly, cross-national variation can be presented directly in interlingual variation. Since many nations in the world will have one or two official languages, translation is the major tool for literary circulation. Cross-national literary exchange and influence have something to do with translation. Translation as one of the most important media, and is what mesology pays special attention to. Translated texts provide a positive study of international literary relations with a factual and visible material.

Secondly, intercultural variation transcends the linguistic level by exploring the underlying reasons and inner workings of variation, but it often presents itself in linguistic variation as well. Cultural filtering and cultural misreading are two factors involved in reception, while part of the translator's identity is to be a receptor who acquires his subjectivity in selecting the literary works he prefers and applying what kind of translation strategy he thinks proper. As we have mentioned above, translation is a kind of cultural interpretation: yet the act of translation is also a receptive process in which the receptor, in order to avoid resistance and exclusion in foreign cultural contexts, will intentionally or unconsciously filter the original information, and thus may cause misreading of the target text. Thirdly, cross-civilization variation often shows itself as interlingual variation. Civilization may be defined as the broadest entity, and for some researchers the term cross-civilization is used rather than cross-culture as a sign of the emerging global era of comparative literature. Civilizations are distinguished in that they involve their own basic discourse codes which are formed over a long history. Communication and dialogue of ideas and theories between different civilizations can be practised through translation, and variations are usually seen when we look for correspondence between ideas and terms. For example, the term *fenggu* in Liu Xie's *Wen xin Diao long* (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons) has been translated as «the wind and the bone», «organic unity», and «suasive force and bone structure», but none of these translations ultimately fits Liu Xie's original meaning.

The four types of variation at different levels are not isolated but are interwoven. Moreover, their basis of comparability is rooted in heterogeneity, which is respectively presented in the language, culture and even the foundational discourse codes in different civilizations. Given that the translated text is a material fact, it is thus capable of providing concrete materials and detailed information to reflect certain aspects of cultural and civilizational heterogeneity. Take the winner of the 2012 Nobel Prize for Literature Mo Yan as an example. His success in getting the prize has again proved that excellent literature not written in English can win a ticket to become a part of classic world literature through good translation. Certainly, Mo Yan's novels were first-class literature in contemporary China first, but only by translation did they circulate and gain acceptance from readers and researchers all over the world. Howard Goldblatt has contributed a lot to this effect by translating Mo Yan's novels. He is clearer than Chinese people in knowing what English readers like and what they reject. In order to adjust to the cultural context and reception environment,

Goldblatt did make some redactions and deletions. Although he has been doubted on his faithfulness to Mo Yan, he dressed his translation in contemporary British and American clothing. That is an important reason why his translation is recognized. (Ji 2014, 32)

Obviously, literary variation is bound to happen in border-crossing movements, and it is because of variation in translation that Mo Yan's works have achieved success in the English-speaking world.

Another impact of variation in translation on the formation of world literature can be analysed by examining what we can get from interlingual variation. In the process of circulation of a literary text from one nation to another, it might experience variation at a deeper level following the combined effect of cultural filtering, translation and reception. This phenomenon, which we call literary domestic appropriation, has been inscribed in the transformation of cultural codes and literary discourses. Through literary domestic appropriation, foreign literature can be assimilated into a local literature and even become an organic part of a national literature (Cao 2015, 180). It has been suggested that the concept of world literature today on the one hand primarily claims that literature of all nations is equal in constructing the entirety of world literature, and on the other hand, admits and respects the uniqueness of every single national literature. Because of the individual distinctive speciality, it becomes worthwhile and necessary to encourage literary exchange and look for complementary relations between different literatures. Unlike a literary trade, which, as criticized by René Wellek (2009, 171), mainly concerns an external influence on foreign literature so as to ignite «warfare of cultural prestige», literary exchange is a bi-directional exchange. In this regard, literary domestic appropriation has offered us a feasible approach.

Variation in translation will bring about literary domestic appropriation. Translation resides not only in two languages, but also in two sets of discourse codes. Thus it involves exchanges and dialogues between the two discourse complexes. Which discourse code will have the upper hand in translation relies on an unstable counterbalance: if the translation tries to be loyal to the original text, it will maintain too much of the original for a successful domestic appropriation. This is quite similar to the foreignization strategy proposed by Lawrence Venuti, and would often make the translated works disliked by target readers. If the translator tries to reduce traces of the original and adjust to the target culture context, he will largely transform the original discourse into the target one. When the target reader gets a feeling of intimacy from a translated work, the latter will be accepted naturally and even be adopted as a part of local literature. So, variation of discourse codes happens in the process of translation.

In short, foreign literature will initially become translated literature after translation, but translated literature is not identical with foreign literature because of the inevitable creative treason in translation. With the help of domestic appropriation, translated literature can become part of a national literature. Literary domestic appropriation is what we can gain from variation, and it can take place on the level of both literary works and literary theory. The concept of world literature today essentially emphasizes exchange, dialogue and mutual inspiration between different literatures. Foreign literature, through domestic appropriation, will bring vitality and fresh blood to a national literature. With no variation in translation, there is no possibility of the formation of world literature.

7. CONCLUSION

When Goethe invoked *Weltliteratur* in the early nineteenth century, he was inspired by a Chinese novel. Poetry is the universal possession of mankind; hence, foreign literature will contribute something to local literature, and its global value is going to be revealed in other national literatures. The study of world literature has implicitly claimed that all literatures in the world influence each other and benefit from this experience. Being born in translational circulation, world literature gets to work when translation makes the circulation possible. Because of the heterogeneity between different cultures, the aim of translation is not achieved by complete equivalence, but by an interpretation of the original in a way that reasonably refers to what has not been said in the foreign context. Some of the cultural differences might be maintained in translation, while others will be diminished, omitted, adapted or transformed.

Translation plays an important role in the formation of world literature, but we should also realize that variation is unavoidable in the translating process. Without variation in translation, a literary text will remain a national literary text for local people. Only by being transformed and adjusted in translation can a literary text be accepted and assimilated by other literatures. Literary domestic appropriation is variation at a deeper level, which does not always happen but is an ideal case to show that variation in translation is able to turn a foreign literature into an essential part of a national literature.

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