

Review

Effects of Government Policy on the Retranslation Boom in the 1990s Mainland China and beyond

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With the establishment of a corpus of two classic English novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *David Copperfield* with their originals and several Chinese (re)translations, the present study explores the reasons for the retranslation boom in mainland China in the 1990s. By sitting translators, publishers and government policy in historical contexts, it has been found that the shift of government policy from class struggle to economic construction, reform and opening-up is the major reason for the retranslating boom in mainland China in the 1990s.

Key words: Mainland China; 1990s, retranslation; boom; government policy

INTRODUCTION

In China, government policies determine the formation of political, economic, cultural, literary and even translational norms. The translation activity is intimately associated with government policies in both the planned-economy and market-economy periods.

Mainland China in the 1990s saw a retranslation boom of world classics, especially literary canons, due to the rapid socio-economic development. For example, in this decade more than a dozen translations of *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen were published, among which Sun Zhili's version (1990) won the "National Excellent Best-seller Award" in 1994. But this did not prevent the continuous production of new translations of the novel afterwards and in the new century. After Sun's translation, nearly 60 translations of the novel were turned out, with about 40 of them produced in the new century. If we view Sun's version as a canonical translation, then the example supports neither Ricoeur's (2006) so-called "dissatisfaction with regard to existing translations" nor Antoine Berman's hypothesis that the appearance of a canonical translation will stop the cycle of retranslating for a long time (see Brownlie 2006: 146), but denies it from the converse that many retranslations of the same source text may occur soon after a translational canon has been created. Therefore, the

question to be addressed in this study is why the translators and publishers risked producing new translations in the very presence of an excellent translation of the same source text. The hypothesis is, then, formulated as follows: commercial considerations drove the publishers to produce their own version in order to get a share from the lucrative retranslation market.

The present study first establishes a corpus of two classic English novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *David Copperfield* that are among the best-loved, most read and most frequently translated novels in China (Zha and Xie 2007: 632) in order to examine them carefully. Then, the study goes beyond the text to the translation market to explore the reason(s) for the retranslating boom in mainland China in the 1990s through a sociocultural analysis of translators, publishers and readers, focusing on the change of government policy.

Government policy

The planned-economy period

After the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949, the new socialist power had to be maintained and

consolidated by all possible means, including that of literary and artistic propaganda. The nature of that power determined that the country was greatly influenced by the “old big brother” (i.e. the Soviet Union) in politics and diplomacy, as well as in literature and art. China’s literary and artistic circles introduced the principle of Socialist Realism from the late USSR. It applied the criterion of “political standard first, artistic standard second” for literary and artistic criticism (Chen and Chang 2000), which was prescribed in Chairman Mao’s famous speech “Talk on the Conference of Literature and Art in Yan’an”. So Socialist Realism and the criterion of politics first became the dominant norms in the 1950s and 1960s. According to Itamar Even-Zohar’s polysystem theory (1990: 115), translated literature is part of literature as a larger system. The principle for choosing STs is, to some degree, always relevant to the system of the target literature. This degree of relevance is particularly important in the 1950s and 1960s, when the political and ideological discourse dominated everything in mainland China. That is to say, the political ideology determined the choice of works to be translated. Accordingly, introducing and translating Soviet Socialist Realism became the mainstream translation activity.

As for the literary works of non-socialist countries such as Britain, France and America, they were under severe censorship. (Zha and Xie 2007: 563) Due to the fact that works of capitalist countries could not satisfy the “socialist” nature of Socialist Realism as the maximum norm for the literary creation and translation of Chinese writers and translators, “realism” became the most basic precondition for translating them. Another condition was the ideology of the work. The ideology of foreign literatures is an important prerequisite for deciding whether they are to be introduced (Bian et al. 1959/1984). “Ideologically progressive” works were, in most cases, those that could mirror the course of social and historical development, have anti-feudal progressive significance and disclose the darkness, ugliness and cruelty of the capitalist system (Thomson-Wohlgemuth 2006: 54). So, as far as mode of writing is concerned, the works translated from Western literatures were viewed as realist. The translation activity of the period thus focused on classical literature prior to the 20th century, that is, the golden age of realism (Zha and Xie 2007: 873).

Take Balzac’s *La Comédie humaine*, for instance. It is a mirror of the social reality of 19th-century France. The “revolutionary teachers” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels called Balzac an “outstanding novelist” and “realist master”. In a letter to Margaret Harkness, Engels (1888) wrote:

The realism I allude to may crop out even in spite of the author’s opinions. Let me refer to an example. Balzac, whom I consider a far greater master of realism than all the Zolas passés, présents et à venir, in “La Comédie humaine” gives us a most wonderfully realistic history of

French ‘Society’, especially of le monde parisien, describing, chronicle-fashion, almost year by year from 1816 to 1848 the progressive inroads of the rising bourgeoisie upon the society of nobles [...].

Lenin (1969/2001) also emphasized the importance of inheriting the most developed forms of bourgeois culture. So the translators of the 1950s had to consider these literary and artistic norms in the selection of STs as well as in practical translating, since almost all of them depended on the government to make a living. According to Lefevre’s (1992) categories of patronage, China in the 1950s and 1960s would be an example of “undifferentiated patronage”, as the Communist Party and its government were the only patron for all the people of the country, directly or indirectly, including translators. Dong Qiusi, Wang Keyi and Zhang Guroo worked for the Party. Their selection of *Pride and Prejudice* and *David Copperfield* is in accordance with the translation norms of the day because the two novels are among the realist classics of English literature. Moreover, the translators’ use of class-struggle expressions provided further manifestation of their compliance with the Party’s ideology. As a result, semantic shifts take place in their renderings, which affects the achievement of higher accuracy in reproducing the original meaning.

The market-economy period

After 1978, great changes took place in China’s political and social life. The propaganda of the class struggle gradually came to an end. The focus of the government shifted to economic development, which has remained the keynote over the past three decades. New ideological guidelines were established, such as reform and opening-up, emancipation of the mind, seeking truth from facts, constructing material and spiritual civilization, invigorating China through science and education, and so on. China began to open up to all nations and cultures. Contemporary works of Western countries were re-introduced after a few decades of reprobation. Post-modernism began to influence literary and artistic circles. Cultural life became diversified. In the 1990s, translators chose whatever they liked to render. Translation of sci-tech books, especially computer books, became a major part of the landscape in the 1990s, since China needed advanced technologies in order to develop.

However, the transformation from the planned economy to the market economy underwent twists and turns in the transitional period from the end of the 1970s to the end of the 1980s. Yilin, as a publisher of foreign literature, is a good example. Its publication of *Death on the Nile* in 1978 caused an important ideological dispute in the country (Li 2005: 28-35). Feng Zhi, the director of the Research Institute of Foreign Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, seriously criticized

the magazine, together with a few translations of American literature by Zhejiang People's Publishing House. He said that detective novels such as *Death on the Nile* and *Murder on the Orient Express* were not instructive at all and American novels like *The Moneychangers*, *Portrait of Jennie* and *Gone with the Wind*, were "inferior and vulgar" works. He said that these publications would have a very bad influence on the building of socialist cultural ethics. As China was in dire need of paper at that time, his opinion was that magazines should not devote the scarce resources to publishing such low-quality literature. Feng's opinion was sent in the form of a letter to Hu Qiaomu, one of the top leaders of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The letter was transferred by Hu to the Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provincial Committees of the CPC. After heated discussions, the Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee and the Party Committee of Jiangsu Provincial Publishing Administration decided that Yilin's publication of *Death on the Nile* was correct. The whole country's ideological orientation in favor of development was set by the paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's remarks in 1980, made in the presence of a delegation from Temple University in the United States:

You have a novel entitled *Gone with the Wind* that is about the American Civil War and was written very well. Now in China, there is much controversy about it. Some people claim that the viewpoint of the novel is in support of the planters in American South. We have translated and published this novel. It does not matter to have published it. We can read and discuss it. (Li 2008, my translation)

Moreover, as early as 1984, Deng emphasized the importance of translating world masterpieces by saying:

This work is very important and it may take decades to complete it. On the one hand, we can organize translators to render them at home; on the other, we can establish editorial departments in Britain, Japan and West Europe, organizing overseas Chinese and Chinese scholars to undertake the work, making agreements with them and offering them better payments. (ibid, my translation)

Deng's remarks and Yilin's initial attempt to publish "banned books" paved the way for the emancipation of the mind of the Chinese as well as for the appearance of the translation upsurge in the 1990s. All kinds of translations appeared in large numbers and the translation market was thrown into disorder in course of the decade.

Reasons for the retranslation boom in the 1990s

In mainland China, the 1990s witnessed an

unprecedented boom of retranslations of world classics. Many literary works from Britain, America, France and other Western countries were translated more than "seven or eight times", as Lu Xun had hoped would happen (see Wu 1995: 696-697). *Pride and Prejudice* and *David Copperfield* are among them. In the following sections I will explore the reasons for the retranslation boom, which has continued well into the new century.

Language updating and re-interpretation

The reasons for retranslation may lie in language and re-interpretation. Language varies from one age to another. So does the way a text is interpreted. When the language and re-interpretations in a translation are outdated, a new translation is expected. The 1950s translation of *Pride and Prejudice* and *David Copperfield* is full of ideologically distorted re-interpretations of the ST, due to the strong influence of Communist ideologies on the translators. When China entered the 1990s, translators began to use relatively neutral language to revise the Communist interpretations in the 1950s translation. On the whole, the 1990s translations of the novels are much less ideologically colored than the 1950s translations.

Dissatisfaction with existing translations

Ricoeur (2006: 7) points out, "[i]t should perhaps even be said that it is in retranslation that we most clearly observe the urge to translate, stimulated by the dissatisfaction with regard to existing translations". The various kinds of flaws in the first or previous translations are undoubtedly an important reason for retranslation. In my interviews, Zhang Ling and Sun Zhili indicated that their rendering of *Pride and Prejudice* was mainly due to the fact that there are mistranslations and untranslated ST items in Wang Keyi's version. They loved the classic; they were dissatisfied with the existing translation; they created or were met with the opportunity of translating it; then they retranslated it.

Commercial considerations

The nature of active retranslations in the context of the 1990s retranslating boom lies in the search for profits. In other words, economic considerations are another very important reason for retranslating, which was quite obvious in mainland China in the 1990s. Copyright has always been a key issue in the field of translation. It concerns both author and translator. As Venuti (1995: 1) points out, "in current copyright law, with international treaties that extend the rights of nationals to foreigners, authors worldwide enjoy an exclusive right in any translation of their works for a term of the author's life

plus fifty years". This means that foreign publishers have to buy the copyright if they decide to translate a newly-published work in a foreign language, which will cause an increase in the translation costs. The People's Republic of China signed the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works and the Universal Copyright Convention in 1992. From then on, Chinese publishers had to purchase the copyright of a foreign work before its expiration. In order to reduce publishing costs, most Chinese publishers focused on translations of works older than the copyright term. Foreign classics, especially literary classics, became the ideal object of publication, since they involve no copyright.

In 1978, the reform and opening-up policy was carried out. Domestic cultural production began to break away from the previous stereotyped style. Many excellent literary works began to appear. Chinese people developed great enthusiasm for reading books, including translations.

The good reputation for foreign literature publication that had been gradually built up by Renwen, Yilin and Yiwu increased the enormous potentials of the (re)translation market. Starting from the late 1980s and early 1990s, old and new publishers became more and more eager to invest effort in their own version of world classics. Their publication helped the publishers make huge profits. This may be the reason why a canonical translation seems not to have stopped the cycle of retranlations.

Problems with the retranslating boom

The classic retranslation market expanded and became very lucrative. Many publishing houses wanted to have a slice of this "big cake". Their wish was met by the favorable fact that Chinese readers generally gave no attention to the identity of translators and publishers according to my questionnaire survey of 30 readers in my home city of Jingzhou in 2011. However, these houses did not have their own translations of foreign classics and they were unable to organize the publication of classic translations due to the lack of foreign-language editors. Driven by the lure of high profits, they invited unqualified translators, such as college students of Chinese literature who knew a little English, to retranslate the classics. As a result, shoddy translations and plagiarism appeared in the 1990s. Zhang Longsheng's translation of *Pride and Prejudice* published by Yanshan in 1995 is a good case in point. Tengyuan Liulijun (2007) has convincingly shown that Zhang's translation is basically a plagiarized version of the translation by Zhang Ling and Zhang Yang. Tengyuan, mainly by focusing on the footnotes, compared translations of *Pride and Prejudice* published by Renwen, Yiwu, Yilin and Yanshan. He sampled a few footnotes from 13 chapters of the novel and found that the Yanshan version produced its footnotes by combining

the content of the corresponding footnotes of the Renwen and Yilin versions. Its text proper is essentially the same as that of the Renwen version. This can be seen in the following fragment of Tengyuan's analysis, in which he uses A, B, C and D to stand for the Renwen, Yiwu, Yilin and Yanshan versions:

- D 燕山版
 P9, 综合A、C两版, 该注释正文与A版非常相似。
 P37, 完全同A版, 该注释正文与A版非常相似。
 P91, 完全同A版, 该注释正文与A版非常相似。
 P119, 完全同A版, 注释正文仅比A版多一“去”字。
 P125, 完全同A版。
 P182, 完全同A版, 注释正文与A版约三分之二文字相同。
 P183, 完全同A版, 注释正文与A版约一半文字相同。
 P207, 完全同A版。
 P234, 除一无要紧的“若”字不同于A版, 其余皆同; 更为奇特的是, 该注释的正文与A版相比, 仅句末四字从A版的“津津乐道”改为“说三道四”, 其余句式、结构、措词皆相同。
 P241, 完全同A版, 注释正文与A版约三分之二文字相同。
 P242, 完全同A版, 注释正文与A版约三分之二文字相同。
 P291, 完全同A版, 注释正文与A版约三分之二文字相同。

(D The Yanshan version. On p. 9 its footnote combines the content of the footnotes of Versions A and C. The text in which the footnote appears is very similar to that of Version A. On p. 37 the footnote is exactly the same as that of Version A and the relevant main text is very similar to that of Version A. On p. 91 the footnote is the same as that of Version A and the main text is very similar to that of Version A. On p. 119 the footnote is the same as that of Version A and the main text is almost the same as Version A with only one character "qu" (go) added. On p. 125 the footnote is the same as that of Version A. On p. 182 the footnote is the same as Version A and about two-thirds of the main text is the same as Version A. On p. 183 the footnote is the same as Version A and about half of the main text remains the same as Version A. On p. 207 the footnote is the same as Version A. On p. 234 the footnote is the same as Version A with only one character "ruo" (if) added and strangely enough, the main text is the same as Version A, with only the last four characters "jin jin le dao" (talk with great relish) in the sentence replaced with "shuo san dao si" (gossip) and the sentence pattern, structure and diction remain the same. On p. 241 the footnote is the same as Version A and two-thirds of the main text remains the same as Version A. On p. 242 the footnote is the same as Version A and about two-thirds of the main text remains the same as Version A. On p. 291 the footnote is the same as Version A and about two-thirds of the main text remains the same as Version A.)

The Renwen version was published before the Yanshan version. Tengyuan's analysis shows that the latter is indeed a plagiarism of the former. This constitutes a contrast to the translations in my corpus in which we have not found many instances of plagiarism. The reason may be that the availability of these translations indicates that they have stood the test of time and their quality is relatively guaranteed. Tengyuan sharply points out the nature of some retranslations in the 1990s as follows:

The producers of some retranslations were not foreign-language workers in the real sense. They were college-student ghost-writers or people who were fairly well-versed in Chinese. They conducted a "re-interpretation" of the existing Chinese version of world literary classics. Their ST was Chinese and the target text (TT) was still Chinese. What is different is that the "retranslation" might be better than the previous Chinese translation, but as a consequence, misreading, mistranslation and distortion of the ST would be inevitable. What is worse is that the retranslator impinged on the copyright of the previous translator. (My translation).

The economy had gradually become the focus of the country since the Communist Party of China shifted its policy from class struggle to economic reconstruction in 1978. Pursuit of money or profit was no longer regarded as the "capitalist tail", namely the bourgeois evil. Many government officials resigned and "plunged into the commercial sea" to make much more money. Publishers were no exception. China saw the publication of 28,500 translations between 1978 and 1990, with an annual output of 2,192 translations. The number skyrocketed to 94,400 translations between 1995 and 2003, with an annual output of 10,500 translations (Li 2008). This excludes the number of retranslations of world literary classics. The booming translation market drove publishers to employ non-professionals to snatch a share because, on the one hand, the number of excellent translators is always limited, and on the other, the employment of them means an increase in translation costs. In the 1990s, it became easier for publishers to hire cheap amateur translators. The population of people who knew a foreign language in this time-period was much larger than that in the 1950s. This can be evidenced by the intakes of college students in the two decades. According to the statistics of the State Ministry of Education, the number of college students enrolled in 1949, 1965, 1978 and 1996 is 30,600, 164,200, 401,500 and 965,800 respectively. This shows the steady increase of the number of college students in China. As a rule, students in mainland China began to learn a foreign language, usually English, in primary and middle schools. And they continue to study it at college. So in the 1990s there were millions of speakers of English in China, although their proficiency was at different levels. It was

quite easy for publishers to find cheap English translators. Due to the existence of large numbers of unqualified translators, there appeared an unhealthy prosperity in the translation market and serious problems with the quality of translation.

Like the Yanshan version, there appeared many plagiarized retranslations, such as Huang Jianian's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *The Lady of the Camellias* and *The Captain's Daughter*, Jiang Siyu's *Madame Bovary*, Zang Bosong's *The Red and the Black*, Chang Jiang's *The Miserable Ones*, Liang Hong's *Wuthering Heights*, Zhang Chao's *Jane Eyre*, to name only a few (Zha and Xie 2007: 811).

An extreme case is a translator named Li Si (Li 2007: 102). The Changchun-based Times Art Publishing House has published a series of 22 literary works by Nobel Prize winners in over a dozen languages. All of them have been rendered by Li Si. The publishing experts of the Nanjing University Library examined the translations and found that they were actually what Brian Mossop calls "collage translations" (2006: 787), namely translations which had been assembled by putting together fragments from previous translations of the same texts by prestigious publishers such as Renwen, Yiwen and Yilin.

The government lost control over publishers' rights to publish foreign literature. Various kinds of publishing houses, cultural companies and workshops managed to make their way into the lucrative translation market. Many translations and retranslations borrowed the name of a qualified publisher, but almost all translating and editing work had been controlled by booksellers or workshops (Li 2007: 103). For example, Yili People's Press, which is located in backward Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, published a bilingual English-Chinese series of classic world literature between 2001 and 2003. The publication was clearly aimed at language learners and the SL was English. The translator, according to the series, was called the English Language Bookworm Research Workshop. Most translations were done by Wang Huijun and Wang Huilin, such as the translation of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Resurrection*, whose publishing interval was only one month! Piracy of famous translations and retranslations was also widespread. For instance, the pirated editions of *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* outnumbered the copyrighted edition in some regions (ibid: 102). These examples show that the retranslation market of the 1990s was in terrible chaos.

CONCLUSION

Now let us see the reasons for the production of the retranslations in our corpus. As far as *Pride and Prejudice* (Jane 1958, 1993, 1995) is concerned, Sun Zhili's and Zhang Ling's rendering is ostensibly due to their dissatisfaction with earlier translations; Lei Limei's translation is probably because of the publisher's

commercial considerations. As for *David Copperfield*, (Dickens 1958, 1980, 1995), Zhang Guroo's rendering is also due to his dissatisfaction with earlier translations, according to my interview with his daughter; Li Peng'en translation, which was published by Yanshan, as was Lei's translation, is very probably because of the publisher's pursuit of profits. All these reasons, especially commercial considerations, constituted a synergy that brought about the retranslation boom in the 1990s. This disordered boom gives the impression that the more prosperous the target culture, the more retranslations it has. This impression is strengthened by the comparison between the 1950s translations and the 1990s translations: there were only two translations produced of the two novels in the 1950s and there were dozens of (re)translations of them in the 1990s.

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