

Translation and Its Socio-Cultural Conditioning

– Comparing Developments in the Chinese and West Traditions¹

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Translation is not only a linguistic activity, but also a socio-cultural activity, and very often even more so at that. As language is part of the socio-culture in which it is used and develops, the meaning of words that are translated must be determined not only by their syntagmatic but more importantly by their socio-cultural contexts (Nida 1993). Following this understanding, it is observed that the developments of any translation tradition must necessarily be conditioned by the related socio-cultural setting in which translation in that tradition occurs. A look into the history of translation, both Chinese and Western, reveals the validity of such an observation. This essay offers a brief discussion of the ways in which translation developments in the Chinese and Western traditions have been related to the needs and developments of each other's socio-cultures. The aim is to explore for insights into the socio-cultural bearing of translation and its studies against a translation and cultural studies agenda.

It is a matter of course that the Chinese and Western translation traditions are different from each other because they involve different languages and often also different source materials. But one should not be content with this kind of statement. For discussions to be more meaningful, one needs to go further and see what happens at a deeper level. The above-mentioned assumption that translation traditions must be conditioned by their related socio-cultures can be borne out by historical developments in both the practice and theory of translation. At the level of practice, both in China and the West, socio-cultural needs have always been a determining factor in the development of translation. At the level of translation theory, the influence of the socio-cultural and ideological matrix has been profound. Because Chinese and Western socio-cultures and ideologies are different, the influences on their respective translation traditions have not been the same. A comparative examination of the major developmental phases of translation in both China and the West shows that none of those phases could have existed without being conditioned by the broader socio-cultural framework of which they have been a component part.

Before Buddhism was first introduced into China during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), the role of translation, or more accurately its oral form, was mostly felt in the emperor's court when envoys from neighbouring states were visiting or paying tribute. The 'Middle Kingdom', as China was called in Chinese, was supposed to be the centre of the world and so there did not seem to be any need to borrow from other, 'barbarian' cultures. But during the middle of the Han Dynasty China was

plunged into increasingly serious socio-political turmoil. The massive annexation of land by big landlords and court officials deprived countless peasants of their basic means of existence and reduced them to the status of beggars and slaves. Under great social injustice, serious government corruption, and the unbearable load of heavy taxes and corvée, coupled with catastrophic natural calamities, life became a mystery for the broad masses of people.

This created very favourable conditions for the spread of Buddhism. For on the one hand, the suffering peasants hoped to attain spiritual consolation from religion and to overcome their sufferings with the help of religion; and on the other, the ruling class hoped to take advantage of religion to consolidate their rule, and they needed the mystical supernatural forces of religion to maintain longevity for themselves, and law and order for society (Ren 1981: 107). Especially suitable for the Chinese socio-cultural environment were the Buddhist doctrines that earthly life is but suffering, and that everything is governed by *karma* or preordained fate, because the Chinese had long accepted Confucian teachings - the gnostic theory of 'heaven-human interaction', and Taoist philosophy that stressed the "pursuit of personal bliss by following one's inclinations and by a mystic union with the course of Nature" (Zürcher 1972: 46).

Under such circumstances, the translation of Buddhist sutras into Chinese became an increasingly widespread activity. Through translation, Buddhism was introduced, amalgamated with Confucianism, Taoism and 'Dark Learning' (*Xuan Xue*)², domesticated, and became a national religion. For some eight hundred years from around the middle of the second century A.D., when Buddhism was first translated into Chinese, the needs of both the ordinary people and the ruling class produced a constant demand for the translation and re-translation of Buddhist sutras. This first phase of large-scale translation of Buddhism gradually died down towards the end of the Tang Dynasty in the tenth century A.D. due to the fact that, by then, practically everything that was worth translating had been translated, and the Chinese now preferred to read Buddhist documents composed in Chinese by local monks, rather than translated works.

After the Tang Dynasty, China was torn time and again by war and, except for battle needs and communication between its sub-cultural groups, there were no major translation activities anywhere in the country. This translational stagnation lasted some five hundred years till the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties (the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries), when the Jesuits arrived in China with Western knowledge. The Jesuit need to introduce Christianity to Chinese society and the Chinese need to learn Western science then ushered in a second major wave of translation.

However, this large-scale translation of Western-language materials, both religious and scientific, did not last very long. The determining socio-cultural needs were cut short by a xenophobic monarch, whose decision led to a hundred years or so of self-imposed national isolation from the outside world. China was only awakened

by its defeat in the Opium War in 1839-1842. It was only then that the powerful social, political and cultural need to learn from foreign, especially Western, countries and to seek 'new knowledge' from the West prompted a third wave of translation.

In the twentieth century, with the Revolution in 1949 and especially the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, there came renewed realization that China could no longer afford to isolate itself from the rest of the world; it needed to clear away all obstacles that stood in the way of learning from other countries. The massive, unrestrained translation activities that have been going on since the late 1970s are undoubtedly the result of this awareness.

That socio-cultural needs have always played a decisive role in the development of translation is also true in the West, albeit along a different line. Although the Romans became politically and militarily more powerful than the Greeks during the third century B.C., they found that they were still culturally 'inferior' to the Greeks. There was no poetry, no drama, and in fact no literature of any kind in Latin. Thus there was born a strong need among the Romans to learn from the Greeks and to translate all the Greek classics into Latin. It was translation from Greek that gave Latin its first works of literature. Similarly, in order to satisfy the general religious needs of the people, there came the translation of the Bible, first the *Septuagint* and the *Vulgate* in classical times, then Luther's translation and the Authorized Version of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and then the various vernacular versions of the modern and contemporary times.

In medieval times, with the strong Arabic influence in Western Europe, especially in Spain, there arose the need to translate from Arabic (often Greek works which had been translated into Syriac in Bagdad and from Syriac into Arabic, and had later been brought to Moorish Spain). Hence the 'college of translators' at Toledo (Savory 1957: 40) during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Towards the late Middle Ages, with an increasing awareness of national identity and the coming into being of the nation state, there came such a craving for translation into the vernacular languages that it was to lead to one of the biggest waves of translation in the West, the 'golden age' of translation in the Renaissance.

During the Renaissance translation both catalysed the revival of Greek and Roman classics and was catalysed by that revival. Almost all the major writers were at the same time major translators, and the need to read the ancients meant the need to translate them into the vernacular. This explosion of translations continued right into the following centuries because the socio-cultural need to translate the ancients never really died down, even after the Renaissance.

Finally, the twentieth century in the West has marked yet another important stage of translation: the need to carry out routine work within the European Union, to consolidate liaison among member nations of NATO, and to search for a new world order of economic globalisation have all prompted the need to translate business,

military and technical material on a massive scale, in addition to the never-ending need to translate massively for the humanities.

Clearly, what can be seen from the above review is that the Chinese and Western traditions of translation have been different because the social, political and cultural environments have been different. For example, the first translation phase in China reflected a Buddhist orientation because Buddhism was a religion that was adaptable to Chinese thought not only geographically but also ideologically. In other words, because it originated in neighbouring India it could be easily spread to China; and many of its doctrines such as *karma* and the ‘afterlife’ fit Chinese society and the Chinese mode of thought very well; its readiness to accommodate Confucianism, Taoism and the ‘Dark Learning’ thoroughly turned what was foreign into a Chinese religion.

In contrast, the first translation phase in the West was a very different situation. For one thing, it was the translation of secular rather than religious literature in ancient Rome that was the mainstream of translation activity, since Rome was unlike China in that it had no literary tradition of its own. Therefore, when the Romans were brought into contact with the ‘superior’ Greek culture as a result of their military triumph over Greece, the Romans felt the need to borrow wholesale from the Greeks. Even within the realm of religious translation, the socio-cultural conditions for accepting the Christian faith in the West did not seem the same as those that turned Buddhism a Chinese religion. Unlike the domestication of Buddhism in China, the introduction of Christianity did not depend on its amalgamation with, or accommodation of traditional Western philosophies and ideologies such as those of Aristotle and Plato, at least not as much as the domestication of Buddhism in China depended so heavily on its accommodation of Confucianism, Taoism and the ‘Dark Learning’.

This kind of difference in the socio-cultural conditions for the development of translation between China and the West applies to all other major phases of translation in history. Three further features need comment. First, with the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, the socio-political situation in Europe changed radically due to the rise of nationalism which finally led to the establishment of the nation state and the development of national languages. Hence, translation from Greek and Latin into the newly-born literary national languages became a very important feature of the Western translation tradition. Though vernacular translation was also a familiar scene in China during its ‘New Culture’ movement in the early twentieth century, it was by no means the same as that in the West before and during the Renaissance. In the West, in many cases, translation helped create the literary forms of the various national languages, while in China its impact was mainly felt in the modernization of the existing written style of the Chinese language from literary *Wenyan* to vernacular *Baihua*.

Second, while translation in China has mostly involved the translation of material from outside China, major translation activities in the Western tradition have dealt

with material from within the West itself. To be sure, there has been much translation between the various ethnic groups within China. But the influence and impact of such translation has not been as significant as the translation between the Chinese language on the one hand and other world languages on the other. By contrast, in the Western translation tradition, though the involvement of non-European languages has also played an important role (for example, Arabic translation at Toledo, to some extent the translation of Chinese classics in the eighteenth century, and FitzGerald's translation of the Persian *Rubáiyát* in the nineteenth century), it is the incessant, forever-recycled translation of Greco-Latin classics, of the Bible, and of sources from among 'fellow' Western language-cultures that has been the most significant. In this sense, it is perhaps not inappropriate to say that the Chinese tradition of translation is an 'externally-oriented' tradition, whereas the Western more 'internally-oriented'.

Third, it is of particular interest to note that from the second phase (Jesuit translation) through the third (post-Opium War translation) and right up to the current phase in the 20th and 21st centuries, the Chinese tradition of translation has been heavily characterized by its focus on translating from the West. All major translation activities since the late sixteenth century, including the Jesuit scientific translation, socio-political translation after the Opium War and the massive post-1949 translation of science and literature, have almost exclusively been concentrated on the introduction of Western knowledge, both directly from Western languages and indirectly via some intermediate languages such as Japanese. There is no denying that China has been Westernized in many ways. However, Chinese influence in the West has been slight because translation from the Chinese language lags far behind the Chinese translation of Western languages.

Just as differences between the Chinese and the Western socio-cultures have conditioned their respective translation practices, these socio-cultures have also influenced their theoretical thinking about translation. In other words, the development of both translation and translation theory, very much like the development of literature and literary theory, has never been isolated from the larger framework of cultural traditions.

In China, the traditional, to some extent stereotyped character of emphasizing the union of heaven (in the meaning of 'nature' or 'the universe') and man, obedience to nature, conservatism in scholarship, esteem for antiquity, inclination to make allusions to historical events and figures in discourse, predilection for an ornate style in writing, obedience to authority, tendency towards inductive reasoning, love of brevity and vagueness in description, and lack of interest in formal logic or in proposing and answering abstract hypotheses can be regarded as features of Chinese thought in science, religion and philosophy. And in a way these features are also reflected in the Chinese tradition of translation theory or Chinese discourses on translation.

Take for example the features of 'love of brevity and vagueness in description', 'lack of interest in proposing and answering abstract hypotheses', and 'obedience to

authority'. Throughout history, from the earliest theoretical discussion of translation by Zhi Qian in 224, through the expositions by Dao An in 382 on the 'five instances of losing the source' ('five losses' for short) and 'three difficulties', and 'five guidelines for not translating a term [and using a transliteration instead]' ('five cases of not-translating' for short)(see detailed account of these in Cheung 2006: 80-83; 156-159], up to the three-character principle of *Xin Da Ya* (faithfulness, expressiveness and gracefulness) proposed by Yan Fu in 1898, Chinese translation theory has mostly been found in rather brief and sometimes vague discourse.

In his 224 AD preface which Zhi Qian, the famous monk-translator, wrote to the Chinese version of the *Dhammapāda* which he had co-translated with another monk-translator Zhu Jiangyan, what he has to say boils down to three points: (a) translation of Buddhism was difficult because the languages involved were very different; (b) generally, he did not like 'literal' translation because it was 'ungraceful'; (c) in translating this particular text, the *Dhammapāda*, however, he had used the literal approach because it was the prevailing approach at the time³.

In 382, Dao An, leading organizer of Buddhist translation in China in the fourth century, wrote an important preface to the Chinese version of *Digest of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*. The relevant passage runs as follows: "In translating the foreign tongue into Chinese, the translators encountered five losses of the original. First, the translators tended to reverse the word order of the foreign text in order to conform to Chinese usage. Second, to appeal to Chinese readers, they chose to use a polished literary style over the simple, unadorned substance of the original. Third, they shortened or omitted the long or recurring chants of the original. Fourth, they deleted the explanations and commentaries imbedded in the original text ... Fifth, they removed those words in the original which function as summaries." (Dao 382: 24; my translation; also see Cheung 2006: 79).

The so-called 'five cases of not-translating', as discussed by Xuan Zang, the most outstanding Buddhist translator in the Tang Dynasty, in essence means 'five categories of transliteration'. Namely, when the translator was faced with mystical terms, terms with multiple implications, terms of objects that did not exist in China, conventionalized transliterations, and expressions that carry strong Buddhist associations, he should not try to replace them with idiomatic Chinese expressions; rather, he should leave them unchanged except that they appear in Chinese characters with the same sound. For example, the Sanskrit 'paññā or prajñā' should be transliterated as '*pan-ruo*', and not rendered meaningfully as 'wisdom', for '*pan-ruo*' sounded more majestic than 'wisdom'. Likewise, 'Sākyamuni' should be replaced by Chinese sound-alike, '*shi-jia-mu-ni*', rather than by a term meaning 'The Enlightened', for 'The Enlightened' would make *Sākyamuni* seem less sage-like than Confucius. Indeed, the practice of transliteration, or 'non-translation', was already a common translational strategy in Xuan's time, but it was he who first discussed the issue in a systematic manner⁴.

In 1898, Yan Fu, one of the most important translators in modern China, wrote an epoch-making preface to his Chinese version of Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, in which he is found to have been the first in China to formulate *de facto* a principle for translation, namely, the principle of *Xin Da Ya*. The beginning and most important part of this preface runs as follows:

“For the task of translation there are three difficulties: *Xin* (faithfulness), *Da* (expressiveness) and *Ya* (gracefulness). First, it is a great difficulty to be faithful. But faithfulness without being expressive means that the text has not really been translated ... A Western-language sentence may range from two or three words to a few dozen, to more than a hundred in length. Imitating this kind of syntax in the translation will surely lead to incorrect Chinese grammar, while reducing it may lead to a loss of meaning. The best thing to do, then, is for the translator to comprehend fully the meaning of the original text as a whole so that there will be a natural flow of language when they are writing down the translation ... making modifications here and there to bring out the true meaning. In so doing, one will have achieved expressiveness; and by achieving expressiveness one will have achieved faithfulness. *The Book of Changes* says, "Rhetoric is important." *The Analects of Confucius* notes this: "Expressiveness in wording is what one should aim at." And also: "One will not go far if what one has said lacks style." These comments not only embody the correct standard for a piece of writing, but they also provide good guidance for translating. In other words, apart from being faithful and expressive, it is important for the translator to be graceful.” (Yan 1898: 136; my translation)

From the above one easily sees that neither the precursory figures such as Zhi, Dao and Xuan, nor the more influential ‘masters of translation theory’ such as Yan, have come out with carefully spelled-out arguments on the theory of translation. All their theoretical ideas, which were nonetheless original and important, were found in brief and often rather vague expression. For example, Zhi’s tradition-setting preface was brief; Dao’s comment on the so-called ‘five losses’ as well as his pioneering insistence that the translator “strictly keep to the source and avoid using beautiful words that may harm the sense” (*anben erchuan, bulingyou sunyan youzi*; Dao 393: 26) was brief; even Yan’s most influential *Xin Da Ya* (faithfulness, expressiveness and gracefulness) and its accompanying elaboration was brief. Not only were they brief, but they were also a little vague, especially in the case of Yan’s *Xin Da Ya*.

However, in essence it is such brevity that characterizes the tradition of Chinese philosophical discourse, hence Chinese translation discourse. Furthermore, because of the characteristic Chinese esteem for antiquity and for authority, whatever theory or idea that has established itself in the Chinese tradition then tends to enjoy an enduring position as authority and proves rather change-resistant. This is true of Confucianism for Chinese philosophy, and of Yan Fu’s principle of *Xin Da Ya* for Chinese translation theory. For a hundred years, in spite of the various restraints associated with Yan’s original understanding of *Xin Da Ya*, the three characters have become a

Bible for Chinese translators and a panacea for solving all translation problems. Especially “during the first fifty years after the publication of Yan Fu’s work, no discussions of translation across China, be they for or against Yan, ever really ventured beyond Yan’s triplet translation principle” (Luo 1984: 10; my translation). Even as recently as in the 1990s, writers still enthusiastically tried to provide amended versions of *Xin Da Ya*, such as *Xin Da Hua* (faithfulness, expressiveness and naturalization) and *Xin Da Qie* (faithfulness, expressiveness and appropriateness), and treat such principles as if they were the entirety of [Chinese] translation theory.

The Western tradition of philosophical thinking is as old as its Chinese counterpart. In fact, Plato (472-347 B.C.) was almost a contemporary of Confucius (551-479 B.C.), and Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) lived in the same era as Mencius (372-289 B.C.). However, while Confucian teachings were heavily tinted with social ethics, Plato and Aristotle were more concerned with logic and an inquisitive interest in universals in the objective world. Their ‘wise learning’ was followed more as a form of scholarship, and was not sanctified into a something like a religion or semi-religion as the ‘wise learning’ of Confucius and Mencius. Within such an environment of thought and scholarship, philosophy, science and religion developed in a less restrained manner than in the Chinese tradition. The emphasis of putting man against nature rather than within nature, the conception of the law of opposites rather than the unity of opposites, etc.⁵, became distinctive features of the Western tradition of thought and scholarship. And it is such features that have characterized the development of Western thought on translation.

What can be concluded from the above discussion of the Chinese and Western translation developments and their relation to the broader socio-cultural settings is that translation is never a mere matter of linguistic transfer. Both internally and externally, translation involves the workings of society and culture. Internally, translation involves the transfer of meaning that results from the interaction and integration of not only linguistic but also cultural elements of the source text. Externally, the very existence of a translation, as well as the operational principles and methods that brings about this particular translation, hinges very much on the extralinguistic, socio-cultural conditions under which the translation is carried out in the first place. Therefore, it should be fully understood and emphasized that, much more than an issue of correct linguistic transfer and linguistic exchange, the success of translation is in the final analysis an issue of cultural conditioning as well as cultural negotiation and adaptation.

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¹ Part of this essay is extracted from “The Chinese and Western Translation Traditions in Comparison” published by the same author in *Across Languages and Cultures* (2001, 2[1]: 51-72).

² *Xuan Xue* (literally ‘the Study of Mystery’). Translated into English as ‘Dark Learning’ by Zürcher, this ‘Study of Mystery’ was a metaphysical philosophy in the Wei (220-265 A.D.) and Jin (265-420) Dynasties. It combined the thoughts of Laozi and Confucius and propagated, among other things, an ‘unworldly’ theory of the ‘fundamental non-being’ and the ‘void of nothingness’. For a fuller description of this, see Zürcher (1972: 87).

³ For a reading of the original text, see Luo (1984: 22).

⁴ For a reading of the original text see Chen Fukang (1992: 42).

⁵ The list of such often stereotyped features can go on to include ‘love of formal logic’, ‘tendency to question authority’, ‘inclination to explore the unknown’, ‘fondness for detailed quantitative analysis’, and ‘interest in abstract thinking, in postulational reasoning and in theoretical hypotheses’, etc.