

Lu Xun: Practitioner and Thinker of Translation

Fuyu Chen

College of Foreign Languages
Chongqing Jiaotong University
Chongqing, China

Abstract

Lu Xun's translation activities and thoughts hold a very important position in the translation history of China. Some of his translation thoughts have greatly contributed to the translation studies in China; however, there are many controversies on his translation thoughts. Some people even attacks his "rigid, unreadable" words. This paper aims to probe into the social background, his translation views, activities and achievements. Besides, this essay also points out the real goal in his translation views and the main purpose of saving the nation by translation, so as to clear some misunderstandings towards Lu Xun's translation thoughts, and make an impartial appreciation of his translation efforts.

Key Words: Lu Xun, translation, motivations, activities, thoughts

1. Introduction: Lu Xun and His Translation Career

Lu Xun (1881-1936), originally named Zhou Shuren, was considered a great proletarian writer, thinker, revolutionist, and educator. To save the whole nation, he composed and translated a good many works. Lu Xun's translation career began in the year of 1903 when he was studying in Japan and ended in 1936 when he passed away, during which he translated 224 works by 110 authors from 15 countries, including novels, fairy tales, and poems. His translation thoughts went through a sequence of changes—free translation, retranslation and multi-translation, domestication, foreignization, rigid translation and literal translation.

2. Reasons of Lu Xun's Translation Activities

2.1 Social and Environmental Backgrounds

2.1.1 Changes in the Late Qing Dynasty

Lu Xun was born and lived in the late Qing Dynasty, when with the development of the productive force in the world capitalism in the western countries was developing rapidly. Ever since the Industrial Revolution, the big machine industry had replaced the handicraft workshop gradually. The need to expand the product sales brought the bourgeoisie to every place of the globe. But the western powers were not satisfied with taking China as a sales market—the opium trade devastatingly impaired the society of China. Big powers invaded China one after another and forced the Qing government to sign countless treaties of inequality. In such an international trend, China's society experienced a fundamental change: territorial sovereignty destructed, the self-sufficient economy disintegrated, the country changed into the sales market and material suppliers. China had declined into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society and had ultimately lost its independence.

2.1.2 China's Modernization

Under such a circumstances, Chinese people then had to carry on the two urgent tasks—to liberate the country and to enlighten the mental of the public. At the same time, progressive Chinese wits had realized the gap between the advanced western technology and the laggard domestic productivity and had been making endeavor to lead the declining country for the better. The "westernization faction" launched a series of reforms in various fields of the society to rescue the nation and to change the ideology of the mass. They eagerly brought in the advanced military science and technology as well as the general science. They made great contributions to educational reform by originating the new style schools which emphasized the learning of natural sciences and social sciences, pushing the abolishment of the Chinese imperial examination system. The "1911 Revolution" ended the chain of monarchy system of several millennia and pushed the ideological liberation of the nation forward. The New Culture Movement discovered that the Chinese traditional culture was the root of old China's destiny, and took various measures to realize the modernization of people's thought, of literature and of the Chinese language.

2.1.3 Upsurge of Translation

As the development of capitalism in the West continued and China's semi-feudalism and semi-colonialism deepened, the major force of modernization gradually realized that only the advanced western culture could rescue the nation and the spirit of the mass. And at that time, translation was the quickest bridge for new cultures and thoughts from foreign countries. So came the translation tide.

During the translation heat, different social groups in China passionately promoted translating and recommending books from the west. In this period Yan Fu translated *Evolution and Ethics* by Thomas Henry Huxley, which introduced Darwin's evolutionary theory. Lu Xun loved this book and that was also one of the reasons why he changed his translation strategies during his translation practice. He believed that everything kept changing and nothing could just stay in one position forever. The New Culture Movement was the turning point of the translation activities in China. With the aim to modernize literature and language, the westernization faction mainly attached much importance to the translation of foreign literary works, especially those probing into the life of people, and the relation between works and reality.

In this way translation was highly embraced by the progressive and was developing at a terrific speed. In such a historical period and with such a strong passion to rescue the nation, Lu Xun naturally set to his lifelong translation activities.

2.2 Motivations of Lu Xun's Translation

2.2.1 Early Life Experience

Lu Xun was born in 1881 in a wealthy and intellectual feudal family in the southeast Zhejiang Province of China. He had a normal childhood and studied in the private schools selected by his father. When he was 13, his family experienced a drastic misfortune when his grandfather was arrested for fraud in the imperial examination. The whole family had to disperse here and there. He and his younger brother were sent first to their maternal grandmother's and then to their eldest uncle's. During the time, his father suffered from some incurable disease and at died, which almost completely devastated the whole family. The reality brought Lu Xun much pain, but he was not beaten down by fate. On the contrary he better understood the world from then on. We could see this in his words: "I believe those who sink from prosperity to poverty will probably come to understand what the world is really like." (Fu Li, 2002) He then had an unbearable hatred of feudalism and imperial examination system and pursued a life-long effort to save the nation. Translation was just the beginning of the road.

2.2.2 Education Experience

With the Westernization Movement going further, Lu Xun went to study in South China Naval Academy, a modern new school. But he stayed for only one year, because he still had to learn some traditional but impractical courses as required by the imperial examination, which disappointed him much. Then he was accepted by Mining and Railways School, where he was first exposed to the advanced western science and technology, and also the theory of revolution. In 1902, with the strategy of sending students to study abroad launched, Lu Xun went to study in Japan at public expense. He learned English and Japanese there. In 1904 he was transferred to Medicine School of Sendai. But before long, he quitted his learning of medicine because of a lantern slide showing how numb the Chinese people were. It was described in *Complete Works of Lu Xun*: If the Chinese people were not conscious in mind, even though they were strong physically, they could only be targets of beheading, or act as numb audience. The most important thing was to raise the consciousness and to bring about changes in their mind, and literature was a good way to change people's minds. Then he determined to abandon medicine for literature. (Wang Bingqin, 2004: 112)

3. Lu Xun's Translation Principles

3.1 Translation Criteria: rather Faithfulness than Smoothness

Where there are translating activities there are translation criteria. Lu Xun advocated the translation of "rather faithfulness than smoothness". He maintained that translation must not only transmit the thoughts and feelings of the author but also contribute to the development of their intelligence. Therefore, "All translation must give consideration to two aspects: one, of course, is to make it easy to understand, the other is to keep the charm and style of the original work." (Fu Li, 2002) He deemed it a feasible way to preserve the original flavor with equivalent grammatical structures as well as the thoughts of the foreign works.

It accorded to the aim of the May Fourth Movement, “to change the Chinese language”. Thus, “not only its new ideas should be introduced, the new style of presentation must also be conveyed...A part of the translation will become smooth from non-smoothness and part of it should be cast away and kicked off because of its ‘non-smoothness’”. (Ibid.)

3.2 Translation Strategies and Methods

3.2.1 Foreignization

As to translation strategies and methods, there had been many divergences and debates on domestication and foreignization. Lu Xun was for foreignization. He compared reading translated text to a trip abroad which should bear an exotic flavor, namely, foreignness. (Ibid.)

In the early stage of his translation, Lu Xun adopted the strategy of domestication, through which he made delicate deletions and alternations in the Chinese version to avoid “uncivilized language” in traditional Chinese culture. During this period of time, he mainly used *wenyan* (Chinese traditional language) and *zhanghui* style in his translation. But with the Westernization Movement and the New Culture Movement reaching its peak—the May Fourth Movement, progressive intellectuals passionately advocated the reform of the traditional Chinese language and culture. Lu Xun later put forward the theory that “for readability, we can only change its clothes, but not delete and revise”. So he accepted Europeanized lexical and syntactical features. He thought the Chinese language was incomplete, “so in order to cure the ‘disease’ of the Chinese language, we have to introduce exotic expressions from ancient language, from various dialects and foreign language as well...” (Ibid.) In the eyes of Lu Xun, foreignization was a better way to reconstruct the national character and promote the national culture.

3.2.2 Literal Translation

Of all the translation methods proposed by Lu Xun, literal translation is the most famous and heatedly-debated. Although Lu Xun in the early period of his translation career had adopted liberal translation, he shifted to the method of literal translation, which was also called “hard translation” after the co-translation of *Stories from Abroad* with his younger brother Zhou Zuoren (Wang Yougui, 2005: 209).

Literal translation to Lu Xun was “word-for-word” translation, which was terribly awkward and completely unacceptable at its first appearance. But his aim was to bring not only the new ideas of the foreign countries to enlighten the spirits of the people, but also the exotic sentence structures and ways of expression to change the Chinese language. Thus carefulness and respect of the original text and the foreign flavor and charm were his primary demands on his translation. He abandoned classical Chinese *wenyan* and used vernacular language *baihua* in his translation. His dissatisfaction with classical Chinese was the direct cause of literal translation. He once said,

The grammar of both Chinese spoken and written language is too imprecise. The knack of composition is avoiding familiar words, and then the composition is well done. In speech, sometimes the words fail to convey the idea, which was caused by the adequacy of language, so the teacher has to have the aid of chalk to give a lecture in class. (Xia Tian, 2003)

To solve the problem, he had to painfully accept alien language patterns and hoped that someday they would be part of the Chinese language. Only in this way could he borrow the fighting spirit from abroad to overturn the old society, and “to search for a new voice from foreign countries” (Lu Xun, 1981: 651).

4. Lu Xun’s Translation Practice

Lu Xun translated a large amount of foreign works in his life. That was 200 works from 14 countries such as Russia, UK, Spain, Holland, Austria, Finland, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Japan, etc, of which the small and suppressed nations counted for a major part. He was to introduce the revolutionary spirits of those nations which bore the same fate with China to enlighten the mind of the numb Chinese people and save China.

4.1 Science Fictions

The translation of scientific works of foreign countries counted much in the early stage of Lu Xun’s translation career.

In 1903, he translated the first work, a historical novel, *The Soul of Sparta*, when he was studying in Kohun School in Japan. After then he translated *On Radium* by Mrs Curie, *From Earth to the Moon* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth* by French writer Jules Verne's, *Lamenting the Dust* by Hugo de S. In 1905, he translated *An Expedition to the North Pole* and later *Art of Making Men* by an American writer. (Yang Cuifen, 2002) In *The Soul of Sparta*, he narrated the spirit of patriotism of Sparta's men and women, which helped the people resist the Persian invasion. *On Radium* witnessed Lu Xun's scientific enthusiasm for he translated it only five years after Mr and Mrs Curie announced the discovery of radium. Lu Xun was the first to translate *From Earth to the Moon* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth* in China. The two works were full of imaginations. Besides that, a lot of special knowledge such as accounting, weather, and geography were concerned. *Lamenting the Dust* exposed the injustice caused by wealth discrepancy.

In his translation of science fictions, Lu Xun mainly adopted abridgement and adaptation which was a popular translation approach of late Qing Dynasty. He frequently deleted or altered many contents of the original texts without much consideration. For example, he admitted the truth in his translation on *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, "Although it was called translation, it was actually altered a lot." (Wang Yougui, 2005: 2) In the translated work, he reduced it from 28 chapters to 14. He also appended or abridged much in other fictions. But in this period of his translation, his main purposes were humanistic and scientific enlightenment advocated by the westernization faction, especially Liang Qichao.

4.2 Short Stories of Eastern Europe

Lu Xun's translation of short stories of Eastern Europe began after the news slide accident. Lu Xun was permitted to study medicine in Medicine College of Sendai at public expense in 1904. He realized that Chinese people were spiritually sick although they were physically strong. And he put more attention to the translation of literature than scientific works, especially the literature of small and weak nations where conditions were similar to those of China. He then became interested in the national and democratic fictions of Eastern Europe.

The representativeness of such translation are three stories in two volumes of *Collections of Stories from Abroad*, translating by Lu Xun and his younger brother Zhou Zuoren. They are *The Lie* and *The Silence* by Leonid Andreev, and *Four Days* by Vsevolod Garsin. He also translated a verse quoted in *The Lighthouse Keeper of Aspinwell* by Sienkiewicz (Wang Jinping, 2006). In the collections, only three works were from the culturally dominant Anglo-Saxon and French areas, while the rest came from Eastern Europe: Russia, Finland, Poland and Bosnia. All those works were about the question pondered over by Lu Xun and his brother—the Chinese national character and the roots of China's sickness.

In the translation of this period, he had a gloomy and pessimistic tone. He adopted literal translation which was deemed awkward at that time, and used pure classical Chinese in the translation.

4.3 Children's Literature

The importance of children's education and the discrepancy of the conditions between children in China and those abroad pushed Lu Xun into the translation of Children's literature. Children are always considered the future of a country, and the education of children plays a very important role in the process of social civilization. But the situation of Chinese children's education was totally out of date at that time in the eyes of Lu Xun. He noticed that there was a big problem with Chinese children: they were either indulged or stifled. The phenomenon also reflected two major ways of the middle-class family education in China: one was total indulgence—the child was a little overlord at home yet a coward outside; the other was constant scolding or even beating, regarding the child a puppy or a slave. As we know, reading has a direct influence in children's development. But children's reading materials then were considered "poisonous drugs to children" by Lu Xun.

"Books beneficial to children are too rare. Ancient books filled with feudal orders of importance or seniority in human relationships are outdated and harmful to every page while newly-printed ones are mostly written by 'ignorant and impudent persons and thus of no use'" (Yang Cuifen, 2002). On the other hand, the profound social changes was taking place worldwide at that time. In Europe, the change of attitudes towards children started at the Enlightenment. In China the May Fourth Movement brought a new view on children and children's literature. So Lu Xun paid much attention to the translation of children's literature and made tremendous contributions to China's civilization.

In 1913, Lu Xun published his translation of three articles, *Education in Artistic Appreciation*, *Social Education and Taste*, and *Children's Curiosity* written and published by the Japanese educationalist and psychologist Ueno Yoichi in *Editorial Section Monthly* (Ibid.) . All those translations emphasized the power of arts on children from the perspective of psychology. And he hoped that people would be interested in science and technology and then the adults could find a better way to educate their children. In 1920s, Lu Xun translated some works discussing children's problems. In 1923, he translated Japanese writer Arishima Takeo's *To the Small Ones* and *Osue's Death*. In 1926, he translated *The Face of a Sleeping Child* by the same author (Ibid.) .

In order to prevent the negative influence of the poisonous reading materials on the children in China, he also translated some fairy tales from abroad: Ukrainian writer Vasilij Erosenko's thirteen tales *Tales by Vasilij Erosenko*, Erosenko's fairy tale and play *The Peach-colored Cloud*, Dutch writer Frederik Van Eeden's long fairy tale *Little Johannes*, Hungarian writer Hermnia Zur Muehlen's fairy tale *Little Peter*, Soviet Union writer L.Panteleev's medium-length fairy tale *The Watch*, and *Russian Fairy Tales* collected by Soviet Union writer Maksin Forkij (Wang Yinping, 2006) . His attempt at that time was to convey the pain of the ill-treated and arouse the hatred and wrath of the people against the strong power who suppressed them. He expressed the idea that although the world of the poor was gray, it was still surrounded by hope.

In translating children's literature, Lu Xun saw the world in the pure, fresh and unconfused children's eyes as it was. In this way, he penetrated deep into the cruel reality of the society and made great contributions to literary development in China.

4.4 Marxist Works

The translation of Marxist literary theory in Lu Xun's translation career was a reflection of his revolutionary spirit. The Enlightenment in Europe gave much driving force to China's revolutionary advancement. Lu Xun loved Darwin's theory of evolution: the principle of the survival of the fittest. He clearly approved that the development of the whole society must follow a rule as the Marxist theory had said. It was necessary to have a common understanding of Marxist literary theory. As the reading materials concerning the topic were disappointingly rare, the only way to make up for this was translation.

His translation on this topic included: Kurahara Korehito and Tonomura's *Policies on Literature and Art* which collected debates on literary policies in Soviet Union, Anatolij Lunacarskij's *On Art and Literature, Art and Criticism* (Fu Li, 2002) .

Lu Xun appreciated the view that art influenced man's consciousness and world view in a fundamental way, so the translation of the works about cultural advancement of the Soviet Union was of great help to build a new class consciousness. His translation of Marxist literary theories laid a solid foundation for the proletarian literary and art movement in China.

4.5 Soviet and Russian Literature

As was mentioned above, Lu Xun advocated the influence of art on people's mind. So besides the Marxist literary theory, he also translated some short stories of the Soviet Union and novels on the October Revolution of Russia, which he considered could bring the revolutionary spirit to the weak Chinese.

The short stories of the Soviet Union he translated were mainly collected in two volumes: *The Harp* and *A Day's Work*. The former included *The Cave*, *In the Desert*, *The Garden*, *Miserably Poor*, *A Story of Ach and Humanity*, *Ljalija's Interests* (Ibid, 2002) . The latter included six of Lu Xun's translation of proletarian literature, *Iron Silence*, *I Want to Liv*, *Workers*, *The Red Detachment*, *The Family Man*, *Coke*, *People*, *Firebricks*, *Wormwood*, *Mature* (Yang Cuifen, 2002) .

In the 1930s, he translated two works on revolution *October* and *Rout*. They described how the lower classes of the society, namely the peasants and the mine workers, fought under hard conditions against the suppressing force, and illustrated the pursuit for a better life of the lower classes. They could make great sacrifice in order to reach the goal, but had finally lost the battle because of the faults and shortcomings of the class as a whole.

Those translations of Lu Xun were very popular and really awakened the revolutionary and rebellious spirit of the Chinese people at the time.

5. Conclusion

So far the paper has made an attempt to study the transformation of Lu Xun's translation strategies and his translation practice, and make a just evaluation of his translating. Translation strategies and methods of a translator is influenced by both the external social background and the internal factors. Lu Xun's translation in this sense was no exception. Some people ever criticized his "literal translation". But if we take into consideration the social environment and his aim to save the country, we could understand much better. Moreover, undeniably, he had made tremendous contributions to the liberation of the nation and also to the development of China's translation profession. It is he, together with a lot more, who introduced foreign cultures to the Chinese society and awoke the revolutionary spirit in the people; it is he, surely not alone, who pushed the progress of the society. China is undertaking great social development nowadays. Up to this day, Lu Xun is still worth learning from in view of globalization and cross-cultural communication. His translations and thoughts on translation are still meaningful and instructive to today's translation practitioners and researchers.

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