Fernando Pérez-Barreiro Nolla

LU XUN'S IDEAS ON "HARD TRANSLATION"
A HISTORICALLY JUSTIFIED CASE OF LITERALISM


Lu Xun

In her article «Literalism: NON 'forma1 equivalence'» *(Babel* 34:31 p. 131-140 [1989]) Dr. Dan Shen makes a very clear and convincing analysis of the true nature of literalism. In the course of her discussion she refers to the historical or pragmatic causes which explain literalism in certain circumstances. I feel that the case of the great Chinese writer Lu Xun gives us an excellent illustration of the functions literalism may perform in a concrete historical situation. The following considerations are an attempt to explain Lu Xun's ideas on translation from this point of view.

Lu Xun (1881-1936) is widely recognized as the most important of the modern Chinese writers, not only because of his creative imagination but also because of his incisive social and cultural criticism. His linguistic awareness was extremely acute and his prose represents one of the most thorough and painstaking examples of reshaping linguistic material into new expressive forms. His was a seminal contribution to the task of modernization which was then and still is an enormous challenge for the rich and long-lasting Chinese civilization.

Of the approximately eight million characters of Lu Xun's complete works almost three million relate to translations (Li Ji 1984). It is not easy to think of any other writer of comparable stature who devoted so much of his energy to the seemingly humble task of rendering into his own language the works of foreign authors, both fiction and non-fiction. It was a task that occupied Lu Xun throughout his literary career. Even before his decision to take up literature as his main field of activity and the one in which he felt he could best fulfil what he saw as his duty to society, he translated, in 1903, two novels by Jules Verne and one short story by Victor Hugo.[1] At the most difficult periods of his life he intensified his translating activities to a feverish level. He encouraged translations by others and helped to get them published. He tried repeatedly, though with little success, to create translation societies and magazines and to edit translation anthologies. And on the very last day of his life, the 19th October 1936, he was working on his translation of the second part of Gogol's *Dead Souls.*

This activity as a translator went hand in hand with reflections and polemics on the subject, reflected in many essays and innumerable references in Lu Xun's diaries and correspondence.

From this practice and reflections a coherent view of Lu Xun's ideas on translation, its nature and its role in the contemporary Chinese situation can be obtained. It does not amount to a fully-fledged theory in the strict sense, but it does offer valuable insights into the problems of Chinese language and Chinese culture generally in the troubled times Lu Xun lived through.

Translation allows us to examine under laboratory conditions, as it were, several aspects of the impact of the West on Chinese culture. In the complex process through which *pǔtonghuà* 'modern standard Chinese' was and still is being developed translation played an important role, maybe even the most important, as far as Westernization at the lexical and syntactic levels is concerned.

Lu Xun was aware of such a role of translation, in particular after his first attempts, which were still conventional in form. Thanks in part to him, this awareness was common currency among Chinese intellectuals of the twenties and thirties.

As the left-wing critic Qu Qiubai put it in a letter to Lu Xun: "Apart from introducing foreign works to Chinese readers, translation has another important function, and that is to help us to create a renovated and contemporary Chinese language" (Lu Xun,1981:4:371).

Lu Xun, however, went a step further and in his years of maturity proclaimed and practised a type of translation consciously aimed at creating a cultural shock by, as it were, subverting from within the structure of the Chinese language, old and new, in the hope of effecting a change of mentality in his fellow countrymen. The instrument for this was what he called *ying* yi 'hard translation'.

The early translations

Nothing in the translations of 1903 gives any indication of the originality Lu Xun was to show later in this field. At that time he had not yet embarked on his career as a man of letters. These translations were undertaken out of enthusiasm for the dissemination of useful scientific knowledge.

Translation for the benefit of China was very much in the air at the turn of the century. Young intellectuals of Lu Xun's generation were the first to follow the ideas of the *qǐmégzhe* 'enlighteners' of the previous one, that of Liang Qichao and Yan Fu. Translations had been their window upon the outside world and throughout their lives they kept their faith in translation as a weapon in the fight against the old culture and as a key for opening a new one.

Lu Xun saw in the Verne novels an excellent opportunity to popularize science: not only

scientific facts, but also science as an ideology. He was following the immediate precedent of Liang Qichao, who had also been attracted to the works of Verne for didactic purposes. All thought of harnessing translation to the plough of language reform seems to have been absent from Lu Xun's mind at that time. He did consider using the vernacular, which he then called *sú yǔ* 'vulgar language', for the Verne translations, but decided against it on the grounds that it would be "too wordy".

The motives behind these translations were shared by Lu Xun with many of his contemporaries, and the same is true of the language used in them, which is basically *wéyán* 'literary language'. From the literary point of view there can be seen an interesting preference for a more concise style, even when this meant going back in time, i.e., moving from the form the literary language had taken in the last couple of centuries towards the more austere *gǔwén* 'ancient language' of pre-Song times. There are intimations here of Lu Xun's mastery of laconic prose in the short stories of his maturity, but none of any concern with the suitability of the classical language as an instrument for the translation of Western works.

"Literal" translation

1906 was a crucial year in the life of Lu Xun. He was then in Japan, studying medicine in a provincial college at Sendai. The events that prompted his decision to leave medicine and start a literary career are one of the best-known biographical stories in modern China and were narrated by Lu Xun himself at least twice in his works. Social and patriotic motives played a decisive role. He thought that "promoting a literary movement" would be more useful for China than looking after the physical health of the individual Chinese. The problems of China were, in his view, essentially social and psychological. He never again pursued any formal studies during his stay in Japan. He taught himself some German, read voraciously in Chinese and Japanese, and, according to his brother Zhou Zuoren,[2] spent most of his time collecting and reading foreign literary works of a progressive character, with a view to making a selection for translation (Zhou Qiming 1957:41-42).

Lu Xun insisted all through his life, and already at this early stage, on the idea that the function of the translator is as important as that of the creative writer. This idea, which more than two decades later was to enrage his opponents in the *Xīnyuè* 'Crescent Moon' Society, was not based on an evaluation of "creativity" or any other quality in the writer or translator, but rather on the contribution either of them could make to solving the most pressing problems of Chinese culture and society. The role of translation in attacking the root of all Chinese weaknesses, which by 1907 he had already diagnosed as being isolation, was clearly

seen by Lu Xun from the beginning of his career. The diagnosis of isolation appears clearly, as Lyell has indicated (Lyell 1976:95), in *Wénhuà piān zhi lùn* 'The Erratic Development of Culture', an essay written by Lu Xun in the first year of his literary life in Tokyo and published in 1908.[3] It also agrees with the ideas expressed in his other essay of that year, *Móluó shī lì shuō* 'The Power of Mara Poetry',[4] which signals a peak in Lu Xun's heroic conception of the artist. In Lyell's words:

> Just as the Mara poet breaks the silence that shrouds the land, so the translator tears down the barriers that isolate one culture from another. the translator provides the stimulus which prevents paralysis from settling in. (...) The twin enemies of his [Lu Xun's] personal life–silence and loneliness–were also China's enemies. Mara poets would slay the first monster, and translators the second. (Lyell 1976:95)

The bulk of Lu Xun's translations in this period are from narrative prose, mostly by Eastern European authors.[5] It has to be remembered that the idea of fiction as "serious" literature was alien to the tradition of Chinese letters. Lu Xun was determined to bring to China narrative fiction as understood in the West and to explore its potential for acting upon man's moral imagination. This seems to me the decisive factor in his insistence on *zhí yì* 'precision or literalness of meaning'. Since it was no longer a question of conveying educational information, but rather the texture itself of a new type of literary creation and as much as possible of its cultural background, no liberties could be taken with the text such as those which had been permissible in the case of the translations of works by Jules Verne.

The insurgent character of the works would not have been a sufficient reason for the "literal" style of translation Lu Xun adopted at this time. He clearly saw something "revolutionary" in narrative discourse itself and wanted to create its equivalent in Chinese. He had not yet adopted the vernacular *báihuà*, but after 1909 Lu Xun always strove to make painfully clear the radical disparity between the original work and Chinese discourse, whatever type of language might be used.

The major works of this period by Lu Xun as a translator are the volumes of *Yùwài xiǎoshuō jí* 'Short Stories from Abroad', published in 1909 and done jointly with Zhou Zuoren.

In the preface to the work, written in February 1909, Lu Xun insists on the translators' "fidelity" to the original, and, writing to Masuda Watarn in 1932, he says that they had tried to avoid the mistakes that plagued the translations of Lin Qinnan (Lin Shu).

Lin Shu was the translator *par excellence* of the previous generation and a past master in making foreign authors, Dickens and Dumas above all, read like Chinese literati. He did

not know foreign languages and had someone else tell him what the author said before proceeding to write it in beautiful classical Chinese. Lu Xun had already expressed dissatisfaction with Lin Shu's translations a few years before. But that dissatisfaction was based then on considerations of style as an autonomous element with no relation to the original. It was a question of the quality of the translation as an independent text in the target language. Now the approach was different: the starting point was fidelity to the original. In 1909 this still meant fidelity at the lexical level, but later it became an imperative to follow the syntax and articulation of the original text as closely as possible.

The other great translator of Lin Shu's times, Yan Fu, had formulated in his translation of T. H. Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics (Tiānyǎn lùn,* 1895-98) his fainous three criteria for translation as *xìn-dá-yā* 'fidelity, intelligibility, elegance'. Although in practice he himself tended to emphasize the third criterion, the first, fidelity, was a much needed reaction against the Lin Shu style of translation.

Most Chinese translators accepted Yan Fu's criteria, trying to achieve some sort of balance among them. Lu Xun came gradually to prefer a more unbalanced position, weighted on the side of fidelity, because he wanted to prevent what he saw as the culturally pernicious effects of the other two criteria. Duritig the period we are considering he went beyond Yan Fu's *xìn* 'fidelity' and approached *zhí* 'literalism' in the sense of strict adherence to the linguistic shape of the original and "trying to reflect every meaningful feature of the text in a form which is as sitnilar as possible to the source language structures" (Jin Di and Nida 1984:81).

The fact that *báihuà* was not yet an option for Lu Xun considerably limited his attempts at literalism, but in 1909 he was already prepared to force the classical language into a very un-Chinese mode in the name of "precise translation".

In defence of transliteration

In the years immediately following his return from China and until the beginning of his most creative period, that is from 1909 to 1918, Lu Xun did not translate anything apart from three Japanese essays on æsthetic education, in 1913, and some poems by Heine in 1914. 'This shows once again that translation was not something he did when he had nothing else to write but, on the contrary, was a prime component of his literary activities. When he was despondent or gave up all hope of China's future he produced neither original writing nor translation.

He did not lose, however, even at that time, all interest in translation matters. He tried

to gain official backing for planned translation activities, reviewed a collection of translated works and helped others to publish their translations.

From 1919 onwards, Lu Xun's writings on translation become more and more frequent. His first major pronouncement on translation is an article published in the magazine *Chénbào fùkān* on the 4th of November 1922 under the title *Bù dǒng de yīnyì* 'Unintelligible transliterations'. Lu Xun had been using approximate transliterations of foreign names since his early translations. What is meant by this is that he preferred to use a succession of Chinese characters that, irrespective of their meaning, approximatively reproduced the sound of the foreign name, rather than invent a Chinese equivalent by translating, for instance, the meaning of the foreign name. The latter procedure has been used in Chinese for some names, as for instance Oxford *(niújīn* literally 'ox-ford'). In the translations from Verne on the other hand we find transliterations like *Bābikān* 'Barbacane', and *Màiliélanguó* 'Maryland' (with a concession to meaning in the final *guó,* meaning 'country or 'land').

Lu Xun's article of 1922 was a reply to an apparently anonymous critic writing in a Shanghai newspaper who found most transliterations preposterous and wrote that "the success of 'modern literature' writers lies merely in the use of names like *Túgiènàfu* 'Turgenyev' and *Guōgēli* 'Gogol'.

Lu Xun defends transliteration, which in his view should be as close as Chinese phonetics allows to the sound of the original name and not be influenced by considerations of any other sort. Translations or adaptations of personal and place names might well be more elegant, but they would make those names unrecognizable. He invokes the example of the Buddhist translators of the Six Dynasties, who had no qualms about using transliterations.

When he talks about the need to make the names "recognizable" he is obviously thinking of educating the Chinese reader by making him or her familiar with the names of foreign places or persons. It should be said here that transliteration is nowadays the rule when foreign names appear in the Chinese press and most Chinese publications.

Lu Xun's attitude towards transliteration allows us to perceive in a nutshell his thinking on translation in general. It throws light, for instance, on his later emphasis on keeping the "foreignness" of the original. When it is a matter of transcribing foreign names, the reasons for phonetic "literalness" may be more evident, but they are not far removed from those behind his general insistence on keeping as close as possible to the linguistic form of the original in all respects.

"Hard" translation: the polemic with Liang Shiqiu

LU XUN'S IDEAS ON "HARD TRANSLATION"

Lu Xun shared a great deal of the iconoclastic style of thought of most of the radical intellectuals of his generation and felt, like them, that China should sustain the full impact of Western thought. Anything less than that, as for instance making a foreign text sound Chinese, would amount to a fatal delusion. There lies behind such an attitude the whole problem of defending a national identity while throwing overboard the traditional culture that provides its foundations. This is one of the crucial aspects of May Fourth thought and Lu Xun exemplifies it in many respects. His refusal to adapt the text to Chinese eyes and ears is an expression of the need to let the language be fired with the flame of different verbal articulations of human thought, in the hope of making Chinese more able to survive in the modern world.

Like many of his contemporaries, Lu Xun was greatly influenced by the ideas of Social Darwinism and probably thought that such an exercise in adaptation on the part of the Chinese language was a hard cure for its many illnesses and a price to pay for its survival. And the same would apply to Chinese culture as a whole. This kind of thought is, in my opinion, the element that makes possible a conciliation between iconoclasm and patriotism in the ideology of progressive Chinese intellectuals of that era.

The ideas we have found implicit in the 1922 essay on transliteration were made explicit by Lu Xun in the thirties, mainly in his polemics with Liang Shiqiu and the critics of the Crescent Moon Society.

The polemic started with Liang's article on Rousseau and the education of women and Lu Xun's reply in December 1921. Translation problems did not come into it, however, until 1929, when Liang Shiqiu published *Lùn Lǔ Xùn xiānsheng de "yìn yì"* 'On Mr. Lu Xun's "hard translation"' and the more general *Wénxi shǐ yǒu jiéjíxìng de ma* 'Has Literature a Class Character?'.[6] Lu Xun replied to both articles with *"Yìng yì" yǔ w.nxué de jiējíxìng* "'Hard Translation" and the Class Character of Literature'.[7]

Liang Shiqiu's articles clearly show the ideological basis of his opposition to Lu Xun.[8] He objects not so much to a particular method of translation as to the whole project of bringing left-wing literary theory to bear on the Chinese New Literature Movement. He concentrates on the translation of Lunacharsky by Lu Xun, quoting three paragraphs he finds unintelligible.

"Hard translation" adds a new dimension to merely "literal" translation. We might call it the "irritation factor". Or, more positively, the educational value of making the reader work hard at understanding the text. The reaction of Liang Shiqiu vindicates this view. Liang quotes the following sentence from Lu Xun's postscript to Lunacharsky's *Wénxué yǔ pīpíng* 'Art and Criticism', which he finds outrageous and sees as a sort of confession of perversity

on the part of the translator: "My only hope is that the reader will make a determined effort and keep on reading" (Lu Xun 1981:17:443). Liang adds that his efforts were of no avail. The fact that he had been provoked shows the efficacy of Lu Xun's forcible introduction of new and active elements into Chinese intellectual life. As he said: "If some readers can learn from my translations, it is quite immaterial to me whether Mr. Liang Shiqiu and his likes enjoy them or not" (Lu Xun 1980:3:81).

One of the aspects of "hard" translation in which Lu Xun moved away from his previous position of "literalism" was his increasing realization of the effects of the new approach on the Chinese language itself. "Literalism" was a consideration primarily related to the source language; '~hardness", on the other hand, points towards the target language:

> To begin with, of course, you have to "trace your way through the syntax", which is far from fun for certain people. But once you are used to this, you assimilate these expressions into your own language. (Lu Xun 1980:3:81)

"Hardness" is also exercised upon the translator himself. Liang Shiqiu and many others have remarked on the contrast between the stylistic polish of Lu Xun's short stories, essays and poems, on the one hand, and, on the other, the roughness of his translated prose. He himself was conscious of this:

> But I stole fire from abroad to cook my own flesh, in the hope that if the taste proved agreeable, those who tasted it would benefit more, and my sacrifice would not prove in vain. (Lu Xun 1980:3:92)

"Hard translation" and báihuà

For reasons already explained, Lu Xun was prepared to accept a high degree of abruptness and even oddity in the language of his translations. This clashed somehow with the general "progressive" ideals of the movement aiming at the promotion of *bájhuá* in the hope that, being closer to the spoken language, its use would make literary works more accessible to the masses. There is, indeed, a certain contradiction between the two aims: on the one hand, the dissemination of works written in a language easily understood by the general population, and, on the other, the fashioning of a new, modernized Chinese language able to express, albeit in an often convoluted form, not only the content but also the logical and linguistic articulation of foreign ideals and foreign realities. It often seems that Lu Xun is fighting exclusively on the second front, seeking to wean the literati from the classical language.

We have to remind ourselves in this respect that *bájhuá* is a concept in need of clarification. It was not simply the spoken language. No written language can be just that. Part of it had been codified in eighteenth-century novels such as *Hóng lóu mèng*. There were also regional varieties of *báhjuá*. To a certain extent, in the atmosphere of May Fourth, *bájhuá* was an aspiration towards an ideal, unified and modernized national language. And Lu Xun could believe with good reason that his translations were making a contribution to such a goal.

This question was discussed in an exchange of letters between Lu Xun and the critic Qu Qiubai.[9] As the problems of *bájhuá* as such are not of primary concern to us here, we shall turn our attention exclusively to a comment by Qu Qiubai which has a direct bearing on the idea of "hard translation":

> Translations must give to the Chinese reader a faithful rendering of the general meaning of the original, make the same impression on him as an English, Russian, Japanese or German reader would receive. And this must be done by writing the *báihuá* a Chinese person can understand when spoken to him or her. To keep the spirit of the original no "abrupt passages" should be tolerated. If "abrupt passages" are admitted, a lot of the spirit of the original will be lost. (Lu Xun 1981:4:375)

This view would be subscribed to by many a theoretician and practitioner of translation today. What Qu Qiubai is prescribing here is basically what E.A. Nida and his Chinese disciple Jin Di call "dynamic equivalent" translation or *dòngtaì duìděng fānyì*, that is to say "a translation which can be so well understood by receptors of the target language text that they can fully appreciate how the original receptors responded to the original text" (Jin Di and Nida 1984:14,85ff.)

Qu Qiubai argues against Lu Xun that readers in the original language would not find anything "hard" in that which comes over as "hard" when translated in the way that Lu Xun advocates. A contradiction arises, then, between "hardness" and fidelity.

It is a valid criticism, no doubt, but the validity of the "dynamic equivalent" theory, as that of any other theoretical explanation of a praxis, is effectively limited by circumstances and, above all, by teleological considerations.

"Dynamic equivalent" translation presupposes a certain balance between source language and target language in terms other than strictly linguistic ones. When the whole linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts are so different and the cultural and political relationships so unbalanced as in the case of translation from Western languages into Chinese at the time we are considering here, it is at least doubtful whether such a theory would be adequate as a

guide to practice.

Lu Xun was aiming at something other than the simple transfer of meaning as such. He seems to have realized and accepted that in no case would the Chinese reader get the same impression from a work as the native reader, no matter how "dynamic" the equivalent linguistic form might be. Even an English reader of today does not get the same impression from a text by Dickens as an English contemporary of the author.

Once this is accepted, there are only two ways: either to Sinicize the work, as Lin Shu used to do, or to use the translation to make the reader realize how far he is from the original and its context. The latter option is the "alienating" translation Lu Xun practised, calling it "hard". It is not far removed in intention from what Bertolt Brecht aimed at when trying to destroy theatrical illusion and short-circuit the audience into truthfulness.

Lu Xun was a man with a mission, a man in a hurry who used the translation strategy best suited to the goals of cultural and social renovation of his country that he so impatiently and passionately pursued. In doing so, he threw light, incidentally, on some theoretical aspects of translation while always keeping in mind the transitional nature of what he was doing and the strong social and historical conditioning he and his work were subject to. As he himself said:

> In the long run, better translators are bound to appear, who will neither distort the meaning nor give "hard" or "literal" translations, and, of course, when that happens my translations will be weeded out. All I am trying to do is to fill a gap between "having none" and "having better" translations. (Lu Xun 198(1:3:94)

Notes

1. Verne's *De la terre* à *la lune* and *Voyage au centre de la terre,* under the titles of *Yuèjiè lüxíng* and *Didi Iüxing,* respectively. They are both free adaptations, as is the case with *Ai chén,* a short episode from Hugo's *Choses vues.* The two translations from Verne are no~s collected in volume 10 of *Quánjí.* Only the postcript of the translation from Victor Hugo appears in *Quánjí;* for a modern reprint of the original 1903 version see the magazine *Wénxué pínglùn* (1963:3).
2. "Lu Xun" was a pen name. His real name was Zhou Shuren. His brother Zhou Zuoren was a fine writer himself, although later tainted by accusations of having collaborated with the enemy during the Japanese occupation.
3. First published in the magazine *Hénán:7* and then included in the 1927 collection of essays *Fén* 'The Tomb'.

4. The title has been translated as 'On the Power of Demoniacal Poetry' (by C.J. Alber in his translation of V.I.Semanov *Lu Sin' i ego predshestvenniki* in an edited version under the title *Lu Hsün and His Predecessors,* ME.. Sharpe, Inc., White Plains. N. Y., 1980). Mara is a Hindu deity of destruction.
5. Revolutionary sympathies have been generally indicated as the inspiration of this choice. The Soviet critic Siegfried Behrsing notes, however, that Lu Xun seems to have had little knowledge of the complex social conditions of the countries in question. The reasons were probably more nationalistic, particularly if, as Zhou Zuoren has indicated, the decision to translate such authors was influenced by Zhang Taiyang. (M.Goldman, ed. 1977:95; Zhou Zuoren 1932:21; Eber 1977:passim).

6. Initially published in *Xunyuè* 2:6 and 7 (September 1929). The text can be conveniently seen now in Bi Hua (1979:67-70 on translation and 50-66 on the class nature of literature).

7. Published in the magazine *Méngyá yuèkān* 1:3, March 1930, and collected in *Èr xīn jí* 'In Two Hearts', 1932. Translated in Lu Xuri (1980:3:75-96).

8. Lu Xun was very close to the intellectual circles of the Chinese Communist Party from 1927 onwards. He never became a member of the Party, however, and in his last years had bitter quarrels with its cultural leadership. After his death in 1936, he was canonized by the Party and then by the authorities in the People's Republic as a cultural hero. See Mills (1963) and Hsia (1968).

9. Collected in *Èr xīn jí* 'In 'Fwo Hearts (Lu Xun 1981:4:370-386).

About the author

Fernando Pérez-Barreiro Nolla holds a degree in Law (University of Santiago de Compostela) and a First Class Honours Degree in Chinese (The Polytechnic of Central London). He has published, among other works, studies and translations of contemporary Chinese literature into Galician. In 1985 he was awarded the National Translation Prize for Children's Books by the Spanish Ministry of Culture. He is now writing a book in English on Confucian concepts in the modern world. He lives in London, where he is Chief Translator at the International Coffee Organization.

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