

AN OVERVIEW OF TRANSLATION IN CHINA:

Practice and Theory

by Weihe Zhong



Abstract: This paper provides a chronological review of both translation practice and theory in China. Translation has a 3000-year long history in China and it was instrumental in the development of the Chinese national culture. This paper deals with translation in ancient time (1100 BC-17th century), the contemporary time (18th century-late 20th century), the modern time (1911-1978) and present-day China (1978). The major characteristics of translation practice and contributions of major translation theories are highlighted.

Keywords: translation, history, China,

1. Introduction

Translation has been crucial to the introduction of western learning and the making of national culture in China. China has an over five thousand-year long history of human civilization and a three thousand-year history of translation. This paper is to provide a chronological review highlighting translation theory and practice in China from ancient to present times.

2. Translation Practice and Theory in Ancient China

2.1. Early Translation in China

The earliest translation activities in China date back to the Zhou dynasty (1100.BC). Documents of the time indicated that translation was carried out by government clerks, who were concerned primarily with the transmission of ideologies. In a written document from late Zhou dynasty, Jia Gongyan, an imperial scholar, defined translation as: "*translation is to replace one written language with another without changing the meaning for mutual understanding.*"¹ This definition of translation, although primitive, proves the existence of translation theory in the ancient China. People tended to sum up the principles identified following his translation practice.

China has an over five thousand-year long history of human civilization and a three thousand-year history of translation.

It was during the Han dynasty (206 BC - 220 BC) that translation became a medium for the dissemination of foreign learning. Buddhism, which originated in India and was unknown outside that country for a very long time began to penetrate China toward the middle of the first century.

Therefore, the Buddhist scriptures which were written in Sanskrit needed to be translated into Chinese to meet the need of Chinese Buddhists.

An Shigao, a Persian, translated some Sutras (Buddhist Precepts in Sanskrit) into Chinese, and at the same time introduced Indian astronomy to China. Another translator of the same period was Zhi Qian, who translated about thirty volumes of Buddhist scriptures in a literal manner. His translation was hard to understand because of the extremely literal translation. And it might be in this period of time that there was discussion on literal translation vs free translation—"a core issue of translation theory."²

In the fifth century, translation of Buddhist scripture was officially organized on a large scale in China. A State Translation School was founded for this purpose. An imperial officer—Dao An was appointed director of this earliest School of Translation in China. Dao An advocated strict literal translation of the Buddhist scriptures, because he himself didn't know any Sanskrit. He also invited the famous Indian Buddhist monk Kumarajiva (350-410), who was born in Kashmir, to translate and direct the translation of Buddhist scriptures in his translation school. Kumarajiva, after a thorough textual research on the former translation of Sanskrit sutras, carried out a great reform of the principles and methods for the translation of sutras. He emphasized the accuracy of translation. Therefore, he applied a free translation approach to transfer the true essence of the Sanskrit Sutras. He was the first person in the history of translation in China to suggest that translators should sign their names to the translated works. Kumarajiva himself translated a large number of Sanskrit Sutras. His arrival in China

made the translation school flourish and his translations enabled Buddhism to take root as a serious rival to Taoism. From the time of Kumarajiva until the eighth century, the quantity of translations of Sanskrit Sutras increased and their accuracy improved.

The period from the middle of the first century to the fifth century is categorized as the early stage of translation in China. In this stage, translation practice was mainly of religious scriptures. The core issue in translation theory raised was: *literal translation vs free translation*. "Accuracy and smoothness" were taken as criteria for guiding the translation of Buddhist scriptures. This may be considered both primitive translation theory in China, and also the basis of modern translation theory in China.

2 2. The First Peak of Translation in China

The translation and importation of knowledge became common practice from the Sui dynasty (581-618) to the Tang dynasty (618-907), a period of grandeur, expansion and a flourishing of the arts. This period was the first peak of translation in China, although the translations were still mainly of the Buddhist scriptures.

Translators in this period were mainly Buddhist monks. They not only had a very good command of Sanskrit but had also thoroughly studied translation theory. Since the translations were mainly on religious scriptures, they thought translators should: " (1) be faithful to the Buddhist doctrine, (2) be ready to benefit the readers (Buddhist believers), (3) concentrate on the translation of the Buddhist doctrine rather than translating for fame." ³

The most important figure of the first peak of translation in China was the famous monk of the Tang dynasty—Xuan Zang (600-664), who was the main character in *A Journey to the West*. In 628, he left Changan (today's Xi'an), the capital of the Tang empire, where he had gone in search of a spiritual master, and set out for India on a quest for sacred texts. He returned in 645, bearing relics and gold statues of Buddha, along with 124 collections of Sanskrit aphorisms from the "Great Vehicle"⁴ and 520 other manuscripts. A caravan of twenty-two horses was needed to transport these treasures. The emperor-Tai Zong gave him a triumphal welcome, provided him with every possible comfort, and built the "Great Wild Goose Pagoda" for him in Chang'an. Xuan Zang spent the rest of his life in this sumptuous pagoda, working with collaborators on the translation of the precious Buddhist manuscripts he had brought back. In nineteen years, he translated 1335 volumes of Buddhist manuscripts. These translations helped to make Buddhism popular throughout China; even the emperor himself became a

Buddhist.

Xuan Zang was also the first Chinese translator who translated out of Chinese. He translated some of Lao Zi's (the father of Taoism) works into Sanskrit. He also attempted to translate some other classical Chinese literature for the people of India.

Not only was he a great translator and organizer of translation, he was also a great translation theorist whose contribution to translation studies still remains significant today. He set down the famous translation criteria that translation "*must be both truthful and intelligible to the populace.*" In a sense, Xuan Zang, with such a formula, was trying to have the best of two worlds—literal translation and free translation. Before Xuan Zang, Dao An during the Sui dynasty insisted on a strict literal translation, i.e., that the source text should be translated word by word; Kumarajiva during the early Tang dynasty was on the opposite side and advocated a complete free translation method for the sake of elegance and intelligibility in the target language. Thus, Xuan Zang combined the advantages of both Dao An's literal translation—respect for the form of the source text—and Kumarajiva's free translation with his own translation practice, aiming to achieve an intelligibility of the translation for the target language readers, and developed his epoch-making translation criteria that translation "*must be truthful and intelligible to the populace.*" Therefore, in practice, Xuan Zang tried many translation methods. He was the first Chinese translator who tried translation methods like: amplification, omission, borrowing equivalent terms from the target language etc. He was regarded as one of the very few real translators in the history of China for his great contribution to both translation practice and translation theory.

Xuan Zang's time is acknowledged by today's translators as the "New Translation Period" in the history of translation in China as compared with Dao An and Kumarajiva's time. The quality of translation was greatly improved in Xuan Zang's "New Translation Period," because the translations were mainly performed by Chinese monks who had studied Sanskrit abroad. Those monks, after years of study, had a very good command of both the religious spirit and the two languages involved in the translation. In contrast, during Dao An and Kumarajiva's period, the translation of Buddhist scriptures were mainly done by Indian monks who sometimes had to offer rigid translations as a result their lack of linguistic and cultural knowledge of the target language.

Apart from Xuan Zang during the Tang dynasty, there were also other monks like Yi Jin, Bu Kong, Shi Cha Nan Tuo etc. who translated a great number of Sanskrit Sutras into Chinese. But they were not as influential as Xuan Zang

who contributed to both translation practice and theory.

During the late Tang dynasty, fewer people were sent to the west (India) in a quest of sacred texts and the translation of Buddhist scriptures gradually withered.

In the Song dynasties (960-1279), although schools of translation of Buddhist scriptures were established, the quality and quantity of translations were not comparable with those of the Tang dynasty. Classic Chinese literature flourished in the Song dynasties. A special Chinese poetic genre—the *ci* was developed during the Song dynasty, but there was very little progress in translation theory or practice.

2.3 Technical Translation during the Yuan and Ming Dynasties

From the Yuan (1271-1368) to the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the translation of sutras lost importance. As the Yuan rulers directed their attention westward, Arabs began to settle in China, even becoming mandarins or merchants. Having learned Chinese, some of those erudite high officials translated scientific works from Arabic or European languages. The Arab Al-Tusi Nasir Al-Din (1201-74) translated Euclid's *Elements*, some works on astronomy including Ptolemy's *Almagest*, and Plato's *Logic*. An Arabic pharmacopoeia—*Al-Jami fi-al-Adwiya al-Mufradah (Dictionary of Elementary Medicines)*, was translated toward the end of the Yuan dynasty in thirty-six volumes listing some 1400 different medicines. This was published during the following dynasty as *Hui Hui Yao Fang*. Later, the Ming emperor—Zhu Yuan Zhang ordered two mandarins of Arab origin, Ma Hama and Ma Shyihei, to translate two Arabic books on astronomy with the help of two Chinese officials, Li Chong and Wu Bozhong. It appears that these translations were carried out merely to satisfy the curiosity of a few scholars. They had some value as reference works, but their scientific merit was minimal, and of no great significance.

The situation was to change toward the end of the 16th century. With the arrival of western Christian missionaries, Jesuits in particular, China came into contact with Europe which had begun to overtake China in various scientific and technological fields. To facilitate their relations with Chinese officials and intellectuals, the missionaries translated works of western science and technology as well as Christian texts. Between 1582 and 1773 (Early Qing dynasty), more than seventy missionaries undertook this kind of work. They were of various nationalities: Italian (Fathers: Matteo Ricci; Longobardi; De Urbis, Aleni and Rho); Portuguese (Francis Furtado); Swiss (Jean Terrenz, Polish (Jean Nicolas Smogolenshi), and French (Ferdinand

Verbiest, Nicolas Trigaut).

The missionaries were often assisted by Chinese collaborators, such as Xu Guangqi, a distinguished scientist and prime minister during the last years of the Ming dynasty, a period of scholarship and intellectual activity, Li Zhizao, a scientist and government official, Wang Zheng, an engineer and government official, and Zue Fengzuo, a scientist. Matteo Ricci was assisted by Xu Guangqi when he translated Euclid's *Elements* in 1607 and by Li Zhizao when he translated *Astrolabium* by the German Jesuit and mathematician Christophorus Clavius (1537-1612). For these Chinese scholars, translation was not limited to passive reproduction; instead, the translated texts served as a basis for further research. Li Zhizao, for example, uses his preface to *Astrolabium*, the first work to set out the foundations of western astronomy in Chinese, to make the point that the earth is round and in motion.

With their translation of Clavius's *Trattato della figura isoperimetre (Treatise on Isoperimetric Figures)*, published in 1608, Ricci and Li Dang introduced the concept of equilateral polygons inscribed in a circle. In 1612, a six volume of translation by De Ursis and Xu Guangqi was the first Chinese works on hydrology and reservoirs; it also dealt with physiology and described some of the techniques used in the distillation of medicines. As he translated, Xu Guangqi performed experiments. Thus, he used the book he was in the process of translating as a kind of textbook, and translation was in turn a catalyst, leading to new discoveries. A 1613 translation by Matteo Ricci and Li Zhizao showed how to perform written arithmetic operations: addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. They also introduced the Chinese to classical logic via a Portuguese university-level textbook brought in by a missionary in 1625.

Although translations carried out during the Ming dynasty were mainly on science and technology: mathematics, astronomy, medicine, hydrology etc., there were also some translations of philosophy and literature in this period. Li Zhizao, with assistance of the foreign missionaries, translated some of Aristotle's works like *On Truth* into Chinese. In 1625, the first translation of *Aesop's Fables* was also introduced to Chinese readers.

Technical translations during the Ming dynasty facilitated the scientific and technological development of ancient China, and thus foreign missionaries whose main purpose was to promote Christianity became the first group of disseminators of western knowledge.

Translations during the Ming dynasty had two distinguishing characteristics :
(1) The subject of translation shifted from Buddhist scriptures to scientific

and technological knowledge; (2) translators in this period of time were mainly scientists and government officials who were erudite scholars, and the western missionaries who brought western knowledge to China. The effect of the translations was that China was opened to western knowledge, and translation facilitated the scientific and technical development.

So successful were the Ming translators as pioneers on technical translation, that some of the translated technical terms are still in use today. However, translation practice was overstressed and no translation theories were developed during the Ming dynasty. By comparison with the large scale of translation of the Buddhist scriptures during the Tang dynasty, translation during the Ming dynasty was not so influential in terms of the history of translation in China. During the Tang dynasty, there was translation practice accompanied by a quest for systematic translation theories, while during the Ming dynasty, the main purpose of translation was to introduce western technical knowledge.

3. Translation in Contemporary China

3.1 Technical Translation during the Qing Dynasty

Translation into Chinese all but stopped for roughly a hundred years with the expulsion of foreign missionaries in 1723. It resumed following the British invasion (1840-1842) and the subsequent arrival of American, British, French and German missionaries. Foreign missionaries dominated scientific and technical translation initially, but Chinese translators, trained in China or at foreign universities, gradually took over the transmission of western knowledge.

A leading figure during this period was the Chinese mathematician—Li Shanlan (1811-1882), who collaborated with the British missionary Alexander Wylie (1815-1877) on a translation of a work on differential and integral calculus. The Chinese mathematician Hua Hengfang (1833-1902) and the British Missionary John Fryer (1839-1928) translated a text on probability taken from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. In 1877, Hua and Fryer translated Hymers' *Treatise on Plane and Spherical Trigonometry* (1858). This translation is a perfect example of how knowledge is both transmitted and generated through the translation process; it contributed to the dissemination of modern mathematical theory and, at the same time, stimulated the personal research carried out by the translators. Fryer and his collaborators also translated some one hundred chemistry treatises and textbooks. Many of these were published by the Jiangnan Ordnance Factory, where Fryer was an official translator.

The earth sciences, too, were introduced to China through translation. During the Opium War⁵, Lin Zexu, a Chinese official, translated part of the *Cyclopaedia of Geography* by Murray Hugh. Published in 1836, it was the most up-to-date work on world geography. By the end of the Qing Dynasty, many medical books were available in Chinese, Ding Dubao (1874-1952), a physician and translator, having been responsible for over fifty medical translations. He was awarded national and international prizes for his role in translating and disseminating knowledge of medicine and pharmacology.

The technical translations in this period promoted the scientific development of China and also contributed to the study of technical translation in China. Fryer, after translating so many books on science and technology, summed up his experience of translation. In his *On the Various Methods of Translating*, he explained : (1) The fallacy that technical language could not be rendered into Chinese should be refuted; Chinese was expressive as any other languages in the world, and new technical terms could by various means be created in Chinese. (2) A database for technical terminology should be established for all the translators; the same technical terms should be identical in Chinese even if they were translated by different translators. (3) As for selecting the original texts for translation, a translator should translate those books which were in urgent need among the target language readers. He also explained that one should not translate unless one has understood every single word of the original text.

3.2 Yan Fu and His Views on Translation

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Yangwu group, comprised of highly placed Foreign Affairs officials, initiated the translation of technical documents dealing with subjects like shipbuilding and the manufacture of weapons, and even established a number of translator training institutions. After the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, Yan Fu (1853-1921), one of the most important figures in the modern period of translation in China, was the most influential translator and translation theorist. Yan Fu was a cultural intermediary who, at a critical moment in history, sought to make European works of political and social science accessible to the people.

Born into a poor family in Fu Zhou, a port in the province of Fujian, Yan Fu attended a naval college and served on warships which took him to places such as Singapore and Japan. From 1876 to 1879, he was in Portsmouth and Greenwich, in England, where he had been sent with a group of naval officers who would later serve in the Sino-Japanese War. In England, he read philosophical and scientific texts voraciously. Upon his return to China, he

was appointed director of the Northern Chinese Naval Academy, becoming vice-president of the institution in 1889 and president in 1890. After 1896, he supervised several translation institutes operating under central and local government authority. After the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, he became president of the Capital Municipal University, later known as the University of Beijing.

Yan Fu was profoundly shocked by the humiliating *Treaty of Shimonoseki* of April 1895, which sealed China's defeat by Japan. Yan Fu was a patriotic and liberal intellectual, well aware of the dangers that threatened the entire nation. In 1896, he founded a newspaper in which he published a great many articles and editorials defending his political views. Yet it was through his translation, in particular his 1898 translation of Thomas Henry Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* (1893) that he established a reputation throughout the country. His list of translations includes Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776), published in Chinese in 1902, Herbert Spenser's *The Study of Sociology* (1872) and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859), both translations published in 1904, writings by Edward Jenks published in Chinese in 1904, Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), J.S.Mill's *A System of Logic* (1843), translated in 1905, and William Stanley Jevon's *The Theory of Political Economy* (1878), translated in 1909.

In the space of just then ten years, several of the major works of European political thought had been translated into Chinese. The impact of Yan Fu's work was well illustrated by the reception of Huxley's work. A biologist and supporter of Darwin, Huxley had applied the theory of evolution to society as a whole. Whatever the relevance of this method, there can be no doubt that for Yan Fu "struggle for life" and "natural selection" were concepts that met the needs of his country at that time. In his translator's notes, Yan Fu declared that the powers that had invaded and exploited China were morally and intellectually "superior," and that China had become "inferior" as a result of relentless international competition. If China did not fight for its own existence, it would succumb to ineluctable domination or genocide. As can be imagined, the translation of *Evolution and Ethics* set off a heated debate throughout the country, involving scholars, conservative bureaucrats and the Manchu aristocracy, and the schools, where the text was frequently used for instructional purposes and the "survival of the fittest" became a favorite essay topic.

Yan Fu was soon highly regarded by university intellectuals, becoming known as the person most competent to possess and communicate the essence of western knowledge. Two other factors may help explain Yan Fu's success as a translator: his choice of source texts and his excellent style. As he said himself, good translators must have a thorough understanding of the source

texts, but they must be aware of the desires and expectations of their compatriots so they can select works appropriate to their time. Yan Fu's choice of language and style in the target language also won him many readers. He wrote in classical Chinese, which had developed during the Zhou (1100BC-256BC) and Han (221 BC-207BC) dynasties, eventually to become the language of the elite and which was still in use in all publications, official or otherwise. He also rearranged chapters and paragraphs so they would be consistent with the style of presentation and organization of ideas founded in the Chinese classics. Yan Fu was thus able to appeal to government officials, who at the time played an important role in national politics, and win their support.

Yan Fu won his reputation as a famous translator also as a result of his contribution to translation theory. He set down the triple translation criteria of "Faithfulness, Fluency and Elegance," which he called "Xin Da Ya" in the preface of the translated *Evolution and Ethics*. These criteria influenced the development of translation practice and theory for almost half a century after it came into being. "Faithfulness" requires that the meaning in the target language should be faithful to the meaning of the original; "Fluency" is the requirement of intelligibility of the target language text, the translated text should be in accordance with the language rules of the target language; "Elegance" requires a translation to be esthetically pleasing. There have been different comments and critiques of Yan Fu's triple criteria in the modern history of translation in China. Most translators or translation critics accepted Yan Fu's "faithfulness" and "fluency," but some thought that "Elegance" is not always valid.⁶ Take for example the context of a court trial, a man is sued for having said in English: "You are a damn fool," and it is rendered as: "Ni shi ge hen bu zhi hui de ren" (You're not a wise person). The translation has no doubt gained in elegance, but will certainly not be a faithful translation of the original and might even affect the outcome of the case. As for the second requirement, that of fluency, it is generally a desirable quality in a discourse, as for example when an interpreter translates for the doctor the inarticulate or incoherent speech of a sick person. However, in the case of a novelist or dramatist who is portraying differences in expressiveness in the speech of his characters, it will of course be inappropriate to translate all the dialogues with equal clarity and fluency.

Though there have been different opinions on Yan Fu's triple criteria, they have not been abandoned by translators in China. His theory successfully guided technical translation during the late Qing dynasty and the early Republic of China. Yan Fu, himself, with his translation output and translation theory, opened a new chapter in the translation history of China.

3.3 Ma Jianzhong and His Perspective on Translation

There was another figure during the Qing dynasty who has long been neglected as a translation theorist—Ma Jianzhong. Ma was a grammarian who was a specialist in Classical Chinese grammar, and was the author of the very influential *Ma's Grammar*. In 1894, five years before the publication of Yan Fu's triple criteria in the preface of *Evolution and Ethics*, Ma Jianzhong set forth three requirements for a good translation in his *On Establishing a Translation Institution* (1894), namely:

(1) A translator should have a good mastery of the two languages. He is required to know the differences and similarities between the two languages.

(2) A translator should have a full understanding of the meaning, style and spirit of the source text and transfer them exactly into the target language.

(3) There should be no discrepancy between the source text and the target text. The target text is required to be identical with the source text.⁷

Ma set very high requirements for translators, and all of them were reasonable. He was not as influential as Yan Fu in the field of translation, partly because he was a grammarian and not a translator and partly because he has done no translation himself. Therefore, his translation theory has been ignored for a long time.

3.4 Literary Translation during the Late Qing Dynasty

During the late Qing dynasty, literary translation was popular and marked another peak of translation in China. Literary translation during the late Qing dynasty consisted mainly of the translation of western novels into Chinese. The large scale of introduction of western novels enriched the literary creation of China where poems and poetic essays were the main literary forms.

This translation of novels, especially political novels, was initiated by political reformers and erudite scholars. However, among the many translators during this period, Lin Shu is the most distinguished because of his large quantity of

translations of western novels.

Lin Shu translated about 160 literary works into Chinese. Surprisingly, he himself did not know any of the foreign languages. His translations were achieved with the assistance of interpreters. As a result, there were many mistakes and misinterpretations in his translations, but he was a very intelligent scholar who was very good at writing classical Chinese, and his translations were very popular in his time.

Lin Shu's contribution to China's literary translation cannot be denied. He was the first translator to translate western literature into classical Chinese. He has been regarded as the pioneer of literary translation in China. His translations cover a wide range of works by a large number of writers from more than ten countries, including Britain, America, France, Japan and Russia. Among his works, the most famous are: *La Dame aux Camelias*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *David Copperfield*, and *Hamlet*.

Literary translation during the late Qing dynasty broke the Manchu's "closed-door policy," and brought to the Chinese people the lives, customs, ideology and social lives of western countries. The introduction of western ideology and democratic progress had an impact on the intellectuals and social reformers of China.

Literary translation also caused the diversification of literary creation forms of China and facilitated the reform on the traditional Chinese novel genre—with each chapter headed by a couplet giving the gist of its contents. The popularity of novels during the late Qing dynasty was closely related to the introduction of western novels.

Translators in this period were greatly influenced by Yan Fu's triple criteria, and they overstressed the elegance of the target text. Since the translations were written in classical Chinese for the sake of fluency and elegance, faithfulness to the original text had to be sacrificed in some cases. The development of translation theory during the late Qing dynasty remained a discussion and expansion of Yan Fu's theory, and literal vs free translation was still the core issue.

4. Translation in Modern China

4.1 The Translation of Marx-Lenin Works

The May 4th Movement⁸ which was the starting point of the new democratic revolution in China opened a new chapter in history of translation in China.

The translation atmosphere was dynamic and active with a focus on the translation of Karl Marx's (1818-1883) and Lenin's (1870-19224) works on socialist and communist theories, and the translation and re-translation of western literature.

The Chinese version of *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels, 1848) by Chen Wangdo was published in April, 1919. And then after the founding of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in July 1921, a large number of socialist and communist theories were translated for the needs of Chinese revolution. In 1922, Ke Baonian translated *Nations and Revolution*. In 1928, *New Youth*, a magazine for disseminating new knowledge, democracy and science, published the *Outline of Leninism*; in 1929, *Die Heilige Familie (The Holy Family, Marx, 1844)* was translated by Yang Xianjiang and *Imperialism (Lenin, 1917)* was translated by Liu Pin; in 1930, Marx's monumental work *Das Kapital (Capital, 1859)*, the fundamental text of Marxist economics, was translated by Chen Qixiu and in the next year Guo Muoruo translated Marx's *Zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie (Critique of Political Economy, 1852)*.

The central committee of the Communist Party of China established a Translation Bureau for the translation of works of Marxism-Leninism. The translations and publications of the classical works of Marxism-Leninism served as guidelines for the new democratic revolution before the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

4.2. Literary Translation

Literary translation after the May 4th Movement and before 1949, made a significant contribution to the introduction of foreign literature to China and the development of literature in China. Translators in this period of time, by comparison with those during the late Qing dynasty, were more selective regarding source texts. The quality and quantity of literary translation greatly improved. Most of the world famous literary works, from both large and small nations, were translated into Chinese.

The translators, most of whom had learned the source languages and literary theory before carrying out the translations, were aware of the significance of transferring literary styles on the basis of linguistic accuracy. Professionalization of literary translation in this period also helped improve translation quality.

Another improvement in literary translation was the linguistic change. Before the May 4th Movement (1919), the language used in literary creation and translation was classical Chinese. After that, a more simplified and easily-

understood vernacular Chinese (Bai Hua) came to be used for literary creation and translation. The use of vernacular Chinese in translation enlarged the readerships. Since then, vernacular Chinese has been used instead of Classical Chinese in all types of translation.

4.3. Developments in Translation Theory

Translation theory, especially literary translation theory, was effectively developed during this period of time when large quantities of literary works were translated. Translation issues like: *the necessity of translation, translatability and untranslatability, the relation between translation and literary creation, the improvement of translation quality* etc. were raised and adequately discussed by translation practitioners. However, the heated topics on translation theory were still : *translation criteria, literary vs free translation*.

Lin Yutang, the author of *Peking Moment*, put forward his translation criteria: "the first is fidelity, the second coherence, the third is elegance." Namely, the meaning of a translation should be faithful to the original, the language of the translation should be smooth, coherent and esthetically pleasing. As can be seen that Lin's translation criteria were no more than a reproduction of Yan Fu's "Xin Da Ya" (faithfulness, intelligibility and elegance). However, among the many translators and translation theorists, Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai were the most influential in the development of translation theory in China in this period.

4.3.1. Lun Xun and His Views on Translation.

Lu Xun, one of the great writers of China, translated more than 200 literary works from 14 countries. His correspondence on translation with Qu Qiubai contributed significantly to the development of translation theory. He fought against the tendencies of irresponsible translation in the first decade of the century and gave particular importance to faithfulness. He thought that a translation is creative work, but that it differs from literary creation. The value of a translation lies in its faithfulness to the original text. He insisted that the main purpose of translation is to introduce the culture and social lives of foreign countries to the Chinese people. He advocated that there should be an exotic atmosphere in the translated works which would familiarize the readers with the foreign cultures. He wrote in the prelude of one of his translated works: "A translation must have both intelligibility and the style of the original text";⁹ he advocated strict literal translation so as to be more faithful to the original text; he was against those who liked to

borrow words or phrases from the target language in their translations for the sake of intelligibility and fluency; he believed that literal translation of culturally loaded words was one of the important means of enriching the mother tongue.

4.3.2. Qu Qiubai and His Views on Translation

Qu Qiubai was a politician. But his views on translation were very influential in China. He was one of the early translators of Russian literature into Chinese. His translation has been highly valued for its faithfulness to the meaning, the syntactic structure and the writing style of the original text. He believed, like Lu Xun, that translators should be faithful to the original text. "A translation should be faithful to the original meaning and enable the target language readers to have the same concept from the translated text as the source language readers get from the original text."¹⁰

He also advocated absorbing new words and expressions from foreign languages to enrich the Chinese language. He said: "We should not only introduce culturally-loaded idioms to Chinese readers, but also accept them as a part of colloquial Chinese."

Qu Qiubai was one of those who challenged Yan Fu's translation criteria. He pointed out that Yan Fu's choice of language and style for translations,¹¹ which returned to the Classical, cut him off from the social development of the time. In one of his letters to Lu Xun, he said: "How can we reach Yan Fu's requirement of 'faithfulness' and 'fluency' if we have to make the translation elegant by using the language and style of almost two thousands years ago?"¹²

He also argued against those who advocated that "intelligibility is more important than faithfulness." He thought that "intelligibility is just as important as faithfulness," and that in fact, practical translators sometimes have to sacrifice part of the "intelligibility" in order to achieve "faithfulness."

5. Translation in Present China

5.1. Translation in China Between 1949-1978

5.1.1. Translation Practice

The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 enabled translation to

enter into an new era. Translation became a very important part of the national cultural and educational cause. National organizations for translators were established in order to protect the interests and benefits of translators.

Large-scale translation started with the translation of Marx and Lenin's works. The Translation Bureau of Marx-Lenin's Works was established in 1949. Then in the 1950s, large quantity of scientific and technical works were translated into Chinese to meet the demands of the national social and economic construction. In the 1970s, most of the translators in China were involved with the translation of United Nations documents after China was restored to its rightful seat in the United Nations.

Literary translation was separated from general translation in China in this period, and literary translators became a very important part of China's literature and arts personnel.

5.1.2. Translation Theory

Most of the translators in this period (1949-1978) took a literary approach to the study of translation theory. They pointed out that literary translation, which requires a higher standard, is different from general translation. Literary translation is an act in which the translators reproduce exactly the artistic conception of the original text into the target language; this requires literary translators to have not only a good command of the two languages but also mastery of artistic creation processes and the ability to catch the literary spirit of the original text. The transfer of the original spirit, advocated by Fu Lei, was regarded as one of the main tasks of literary translation. Fu Lei is one of the famous translators who translated from French into Chinese. He translated many of Balzac's works. In the preface of one of his translations, he wrote: "As a product, translation is like imitating a picture. What is more important is the likeness of spirit not resemblance to the original one." ¹³

Thus, an artistic literary translation depends on the transfer of the spirit of the original text; if the original text is an artistic work, it should remain artistic after it is rendered into another language. The advocating of "being alike in spirit" for literary translation does not deny the significance of "being alike in appearance." A good translation product should both be "alike in spirit and appearance." If, for linguistic and cultural reasons, the translator is in a dilemma as to whether to transfer either the appearance (grammatical and syntactic structure etc.) or the literary spirit, he should, according to Fu's principle, sacrifice appearance to spirit.

Fu's advocating for literary translation was widely accepted. Tang Ren, a translator and translation theorist, pointed out in response to Fu's theory that "a translator should first catch the thoughts, emotion, style and spirit of the original text, and then express them exactly in another language."¹⁴

Fu's theory, as I see it, is just an extension of Yan Fu's "Xin Da Ya" (faithfulness, fluency, elegance). If Yan's three-character criteria are a guideline for general translation, Fu's "sheng si" (be alike in spirit) may be regarded as the ultimate requirement for literary translation. It is not so useful for guiding the translation of technical and specialized texts.

In 1964, Qian Zhongshu, a member of the cultural elite in present-day China, put forward his "transmigration theory" for literary translation.¹⁵ "Transmigration" in Buddhism means the process by which the soul, spirit, or some other seat of personality, vacates the body it has been occupying and enters another body or object. Qian borrowed the Buddhist term in summarizing his theory of literary translation. A literary translation is like the act of transmigration in which the soul, the spirit of the original text remain in the target text even although the carrier of them, the language, has changed. Qian's requirement for literary translation was so high that he himself had to admit that it was impossible to transmigrate everything of the original text to the target language, and that perfect transmigration of the original text into the target language was just an ideal.

5.2. Translation in China After 1978

5.2.1. Translation Practice and the Training Of Translators

In 1978, two years after the end of disastrous "cultural revolution," China adopted its "open door and reform" policy. A new and dynamic atmosphere for translation emerged. With the booming economy, more and more qualified translators and interpreters are needed by all sorts of institutions, especially those in the developed coastal areas, where preferential policies have been granted by the central government, greatly spurring the development of foreign trade, economic and diplomatic relations. Although literary translation remains a very important part of translation practice, translations concerning international trade, foreign affairs, technology, information science etc. are the main tasks of the 500,000 translators. They not only translate into but also from Chinese for the promotion of Chinese culture in the world. Although English is the main foreign language for translation, they translate from and into more than a hundred languages from all over the world.

The China Translators Association, organized in 1982, with the approval of and support from the State Council, is the authoritative organization for instructing and coordinating translation in China. The academic journal, *China Translators' Journal*, published by China Translators' Association has been acknowledged as the highest level translation studies journal in China. The aim of the journal is to promote research in translation theory, exchange translation experiences, comment on translation works etc. It introduces to translators all over the country the latest translation theories both from abroad and from China.

The urgent need of qualified translators and interpreters has prompted higher educational institutions with foreign languages departments or foreign languages educational institutions to establish translation as a degree course.

Translation as an M.A course started before its inception as a B.A course in China. In 1979, the United Nations Translators and Interpreters Centre was set up in Beijing Foreign Studies University with funds from the United Nations. The main purpose of the centre was to train skilled translators and simultaneous conference interpreters for the United Nations. The three-year training program has been very successful. From 1986 to 1995, about 200 people have graduated with an M.A in either translation or interpreting. They constitute the main force in both translation and interpreting practice and theory research.

There was no B.A degree in translation or interpreting in China until 1994 when Guangdong University of Foreign Studies and Xiamen University pioneered Translation and Interpreting Studies as a B.A degree course with support from the British Council and the University of Westminster in order to meet the needs of the economic boom in the area. The establishment of translation and interpreting as M.A and B. A degree courses will no doubt promote and improve both translation practice and research into theory in China.

5.2.2 Developments in Translation Theory

After China opened its door to the outside world, Chinese translators and translation theorists were able to broaden their views. The discussion of translation theories were no longer focuses on issues like translation criteria, literal translation vs free translation and the like. With the introduction of different views on translation from the west, Chinese translators are rethinking the theories they have followed, and research in translation theories has diversified. However, there are two main schools of translation

theorists, namely, the linguistic school and the literal and cultural school. Those who take a linguistic approach to the study of translation are mainly linguists, teachers of translation at universities who have read extensively on the western translation theories. They may be influenced by Catford, Nida and others, and stress that translation theory is an independent linguistic discipline, derived from observation and providing the basis for practice. While those who take the literal and cultural approach are mainly writers, literary translators and practical general translators who have read literature on translation by Chinese theorists.

Jin Di, who lectured on translation theory and practice at Nankai University and the Foreign Languages Institute of Tianjin for many years, coauthored with Eugene Nida the popular *On Translation* (1984) introducing to the Chinese translation community his "dynamic equivalence" translation with reference to English and Chinese. Jin Di, taking consideration of the history of translation in China and applying his linguistic expertise and his research on translation theory, concluded that "dynamic equivalence" translation, which is based on the comparison of reader response to the source text and the target text, is applicable in China.

Translation theorists like Professor Jin Di, who had opportunities to do his research and exchange academic views with experts in the U.S and European countries, brought to the translation community of China a more westernized model of translation theory. They absorbed the essence of western translation theory and combined them with their own research in order to develop a new theory, which is more applicable in China. They, like most of their western colleagues, took a linguistic approach towards their research on translation, aiming to establish translatology in China.

Traditional scholars, who did their research on translation theory with references which were mainly from the history of translation of China, took a literal and cultural approach towards their research. The main issues on translation they discussed continued to be the principles, criteria and methods of translation. In their works we can see that Yan Fu and his three-character translation theory are still influencing translation theorists in China, although they have endowed the three characters (xin, da, ya) with new interpretations.

Apart from research on the systematic translation theory, the study of technical and specialized translation has also been popular among Chinese translators since Deng Xiaopin opened the door of the country to the outside world. In order to activate research on technical and specialized translation, an academic journal, *China Technical Translation*, was launched in 1992. Up to now, more than 500 essays, with valuable perspectives on technical and

specialized translation, have been published in *China Technical Translation*. Those essays will no doubt become the main components of Chinese technical translation theory.

Further important evidence of progress in the field of translation studies in China during this period is the establishment of "translation studies" as an independent subject in China. although translation has a 3000-year long history in China, it has never been regarded as an independent subject. There is no entry for "translation studies" in the authoritative Chinese Encyclopedia. The publication of the first book entitled "*Translatology*," a discussion on establishing "translation studies" as an independent subject, was followed by heated discussions. Experts fell over each other to contribute to *China Translators' Journal* on how to establish translation studies as an independent subject in China, what kind of translation studies there should be and so on. The discussions led to an agreement that it is necessary to establish translation studies as an independent subject with Chinese characteristics. Considering the special characteristics of the Chinese language and culture, we should distinguish translation studies from translation by acknowledging that the first is science while the second is practice.

VI. Conclusion: Translation In China-Facing a Challenge

Looking back over the history of translation of China, we find that, on the one hand, China has a long history of translation and the development of some translation theories; on the other hand, it is hard to find a systematic translation theory to guide translation practice although there are prescriptive explanations of how to translate. By comparing this situation with the west, we find that the development of translation, and especially translation theory, is lagging in China although it is now a major translation user. With its booming economy and the expansion of its political influence in the international community, China is now facing a challenge in the development of translation.

¹ Gongyan, J about 1000 b.c *Zhou Li (The Rituals of Zhou)* Gongyan,J about 1000 b.c *Zhou Li (The Rituals of Zhou)*

² Zhong,W.H 1996 *Professor Peter Newmark and His Translation Theory*.

³ Li,P 1983 *A Brief History of Translation in China* Beijing

⁴ Great Vehicle: The doctrine of Buddhism is founded on the oral teaching of

Buddha (sixth century B.C) and is divided into two main sects: earlier Buddhism or "the lesser vehicle," which developed mainly in the north of the region (Tibet, China, Japan), and evolved into today's Buddhism, and "the Great Vehicle," which is more open to new ideas regarding religion, mysticism and cults. The "Great Vehicle" led to the formation of a variety of sects.

⁵ "The Opium War": The first Opium War (1839-1842) was provoked by China's effort to seize a large consignment of opium which had been illegally imported by the British. The British besieged Canton and forced the Chinese to cede Hong Kong. The Chinese were also forced to return the confiscated opium and open several ports to European trade.

⁶ Yuanren Zhao expressed his disagreement in his *Dimension of Fidelity in Translation, with special reference to Chinese* 1976 Stanford University Press

⁷ Ma.J 1894 *On Establishing a Translation Institute*.

⁸ "The May 4th Movement": On May 4th, 1919, a demonstration of some 5000 Peking students called for a rejection of the Versailles Peace Conference decision that Japan should have rights over Shandong. The demonstration grew into a powerful and voiceferous mass movement against the warlord government in Peking who were regarded as traitors because of their acceptance of the Japanese demands. Nationalist feelings which had hitherto been limited to a few intellectuals now spread through all levels of society when demonstrators were arrested. The student strike in Peking rapidly spread not only to colleges in other centers, but also to factory office and shop workers, and a massive boycott of Japanese goods was organized. This May 4th Movement spilled over into an intellectual revolution, the New Cultural Movement, as the Chinese grappled with new ideas and tried to understand their situation.

⁹ Lu, X 1935 *Ti Wei Ding Cao* The Commercial Press

¹⁰ Qu, Q.B 1928 *A Letter on Translation to Lu Xun* China Translator's Journal

¹¹ Yan Fu translated in *Classical mandarin* which was developed during the Zhou (1000-200b.c) and Han (200-100b.c) dynasties.

¹² Qu, Q.B 1928 *A Letter on Translation to Lu Xun* China Translator's Journal

¹³ Fu, L 1951 *The Preface of Gao Lao Tou* Beijing

¹⁴ Tang, R 1950 *Translation is Art* from the tenth issue of *Translation Journal*

¹⁵ Qian, Z.S 1964 *Lin Shu's Translation* Commercial Press

Bibliography

Amos, F.R 1881 *Early Theories of Translation* Cambridge University Press

Bassnet, S 1980 *Translation Studies* Clays Ltd, Stlves plc, England

1990 *Translation: History and Culture* Printer Publishers Limited

Bell, R 1991 *Translation and Translating* Longman

Chao, Y.R 1976 *Aspects of Chinese Socio-Linguistics* Standford University Press

Chaochin, L 1990 *Guo Yu Xue Taipei* Student Bookstore

Chen, F.G 1992 *A History of Chinese Translation Theories* Shanghai Foreign Languages Press

Chen, Y.G 1989 *A Concise History of China's Literary Translation* Beijing

Chestman, A(ed) 1989 *Readings in Translation Theory* Helsinki

Delisle, J(ed) 1996 *Translators Through History* John Benjamins Publishing Company

Deng, Y & Liu, R 1989 *Language and Culture* Foreign Language and Research Press

Di, J & Nida, E 1984 *On Translation* China Foreign Languages Press

Feng, Y.J 1983 *An Outline History of Classical Chinese Literature* Joint Publishing House

Forrest, R.A.D 1973 *The Chinese Language* London Faber and Faber

Gentzler, E 1993 *Contemporary translation Theories* London

Hermans, T(ed) 1985 *The Manipulation of Literature: studies in literary translation*

Croom Helm Australia Pty Ltd

Huang, L 1988 Translatology Jiangsu Educational Publishing House

Kelly, L 1979 The True Interpreter: a History of Translation Theory and Practice in the West Oxford

Lefevere, A(ed) 1992 Translation: History and Culture London

Ma, Z.Y 1983 A Brief History of Translation in China Beijing

Newmark, P 1988 Approaches to Translation Prentice Hall (UK) Ltd

1988 A Textbook of Translation Prentice Hall (UK) Ltd

1991 About Translation Multilingual Matters

Nida, E 1993 Language, Culture and Translation Shanghai

1964 Towards a Science of Translating Leiden

Pan, L 1983 A Brief History of Translation in China Beijing

Shan, P 1975 Introduction to Chinese Language Taipei

Steiner, G 1992 After Babel, Aspects of Language and Translation London

Steiner, T 1975 English Translation Theory 1650-1800 Assen

Zhang, P.J 1983 A Coursebook of Translation from English into Chinese Commercial Press

Zhong, W.H 1991 On Translation Criteria Language and Translation Journal.No.4

1996 Challenge to China: Advance Translation IATEFL Presentation

1992 On the Translation of Literary Style China Translators' Journal No.3

© **Copyright Translation Journal and the Author 2003**

URL: <http://accurapid.com/journal/24china.htm>

Volume 7, No. 2, April 2003

Last updated on: 05/03/2003 17:03:14