Translation studies in China or Chinese-related translation studies:

Defining Chinese translation studies*

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1. Introduction: the paradox of the Chinese language and Chinese-related translation

As the theme of the Fifth Conference on Translation suggests, Chinese, among others such as Arabic and Portuguese, is one of the 'less-translated' languages ('Interculturality and Translation: Less-Translated Languages', Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 29–31 October 2001). Indeed, if the American situation, apart from the more general situations described in the conference's Call for Papers, can serve as a further indication, Chinese literature is one of the least translated literatures into English; and perhaps one of the least read in America (see Howard Goldblatt's account of the situation in Bei 2001, esp. p.39). If Chinese has been a less-translated source language, to be sure, as a target language, it may be one of the most translated languages in the world.[1] Thus the paradox about the Chinese language is its imbalanced presence on the translation scene: an at once little and much translated language.

On the scene of translation studies, then, how much of the translation that involves Chinese has been presented for academic research, and how much of such research has been published internationally, say, in English? Not much. The numbers of research publications in the few international journals on translation studies would quite probably give one such an impression. On the other hand, translation that involves Chinese, either as the source or the target language, has been actively studied in China's universities (including those in Taiwan and Hong Kong)[2]; but most of such studies are published in Chinese. Hence in parallel to the paradox about the Chinese language, the paradox about

Chinese translation studies is its imbalanced status as a much studied subject at home but a little-noted branch of translation studies in the world.

Such an imbalance between Chinese translation studies and translation studies in general, if viewed from a Chinese standpoint, is easy to give rise to speculation and assertion that Chinese language and culture, and by extension Chinese translation studies, are unique and should be studied in or even on its own terms. Indeed, among translators and translation scholars in the PRC, there has been articulate eagerness to formulate some translation theory or to establish a translatology that demonstrates "Chinese characteristics", i.e. features that are different from other systems of translation studies in e.g. research philosophy, interests and methodology (Tan 1998:15; see also Xie 2001, who has identified such emphasis on self-containedness as one of the three 'misconceptions' in China's translation studies).

2. Translation studies in China vs. Chinese translation studies

Yet what referred to in English as "translation studies with *Chinese* characteristics" is itself in want of a rigorous description. Actually, the conceptual complications of the Chinese original of "Chinese characteristics", i.e., *zhong-guo te se* ('China['s] special colour'), has yet to be examined and characterized.

As noted by some Chinese scholars (e.g. Dong 1997:3), there is a lack of understanding, or communication, between Chinese translation studies and translation studies in other languages/cultures. Such a lack of understanding or communication has led, on the Chinese side, to some (over-)emphasis on the so-called Chineseness of the Chinese-specific translation theories, which has remained vague in both theory and practice (cf. Chang 2000). Until as late as the late 1990s, seldom has Chinese translation studies been approached from a global perspective of international translation studies at large. An attempt at identifying any specific features of Chinese translation studies is found in Hu (1998), which has presented the following five features; but without a comparative investigation with reference to translation studies in other languages and cultures, the specificity has yet to be verified:

1. Translation theories are rooted in the nation's culture and manifest its cultural heritage;
2. Many translation theorists in ancient times did not have a foreign language;

3.   Theorists have demonstrated a strong sense of mission;
4.   Serious efforts have been made in training translators;
5.   Translation theories have shown a poly-faceted tendency of development.

As one can see, it is very difficult to argue that the above phenomena are non-existent in other traditions. If there were any "Chinese characteristics" that should be preserved, the second one should not be included for obvious and plausible reasons. What is truly at issue, however, is that to make a characterization of Chinese translation studies viable, one has to distinguish the roles played respectively by theorists, practitioners, and translation policy makers in the development of the discipline, which is beyond the scope of the current paper.

But towards this end we can, first and foremost, try to clarify what the term "Chinese" means when we talk about the "Chineseness" of Chinese translation studies. If in general *Chinese* specifies or refers to something concerned with or belonging to China, *zhongguo* or 'central country', the issue boils down to the conception of *China* either as (1) a geopolitical body of a nation-state, or (2) a nation, a linguistic and cultural entity in an anthropological sense. In the first case, *China* as a nation-state would have as its core defining elements concepts such as SOVEREIGNTY, BORDERS, and GOVERNMENT. If *Zhongguo fanyi* ('China translation') is referred to in this sense, then it should mean China's translation studies or translation studies in China. In the second case, *China* or its derivative *Chinese* would have as its core defining elements concepts such as ETHNOGRAPHIC LINEAGE, CULTURE, and LANGUAGE. If *Zhongguo fanyi* is referred to in this sense, then it should denote Chinese translation studies or Chinese-related translation studies.

In fact, the term *Zhongguo fanyi*, in want of a rigorous characterization, has frequently been used in a very narrow but not necessarily accurate sense, that is, with parameters such as NATIONAL BORDERS, NATIONALITY, ETHNOGRAPHIC LINEAGE, and LANGUAGE included in its covert definition. In its actual use, the term, frequently referred to as "our translation research" or "our country's translation theories" by some PRC scholars, usually stands for the mainstream translation studies within the boundaries of the PRC as a geopolitical body, mainly conducted by the mainland Chinese scholars in relation to the Mandarin-Chinese language. For instance, the special issue of *Meta* on Chinese translation studies (Xu and Wang eds. 1999), a collection of research papers by scholars in mainland China, is entitled *The Theory and Practice of Translation in China* in English and *Théorie et pratique de la traduction en Chine* in French.

If *Zhongguo fanyi* is used in the second sense outlined above, that is, with academically less relevant parameters such as national boundaries, the nationality and ethnographic lineage of researchers factored out, then it can concern itself solely with issues such as lingual and cultural phenomena related to translation into or out of Chinese, encompassing all research efforts made in any part of the world and in any period of history. The special issue of *Perspectives* on Chinese translation (Wang and Xu eds. 1996), in comparison with the special issue of *Meta*, is a case in point. The issue includes articles from Chinese American and British scholars, and has as its title *Special Issue: Chinese translation studies*.

Defined in this broader, but more realistic and accurate sense, Chinese translation studies can be freeer to focus on translational phenomena in relation to the cultural, literary, and linguistic concerns that underlie the characteristics of Chinese-speaking communities across the world. In this way, the discipline can be more ready to open itself on an international scale to other fields of Chinese-related academic study, such as Chinese linguistics, Chinese literary scholarship, Chinese cultural studies, as well as translation studies in other languages and cultures.

3.   Chinese translation studies and Western/ "foreign" translation studies

In comparison with Chinese translation studies construed in the narrow sense, i.e. translation studies in China, other systems of translation studies developed outside China are generally bundled into the category of Western or "foreign" translation studies in the Chinese literature on translation studies. Whenever there is a need to assert the Chineseness of Chinese translation studies as a self-contained system, the assumed Chinese-Western parallels would be polarized into two opposite systems. Tan (1998), for one, has timely suggested the need for more active interactions or comparative studies between Chinese and other translation studies systems. Yet the two systems proposed for comparison were still the Chinese and the Western, which were further regarded as two most important systems in the world (pp.13 and 16), although on the other hand he (p.12) has rightly pointed out that proposing Chinese translation studies be a unique and self-contained system would amount to presupposing the existence of other similarly unique and self-contained systems of translation studies in the world.

Yet little effort has been made to establish the existence of such "foreign"

systems, or to describe in what way and to what degree they are unique and self-contained. In such a simplistic picture, the presence of the "other systems" that should be viewed on a par with the Chinese, has been conceptually blurred into an ill-identified collective body under the blanket term of "Western theory" (Note that grammatically Chinese does not specify whether a noun is in singular or plural).

The obliteration of the distinction between the two notions, i.e., the inclusive CHINESE TRANSLATION STUDIES and the exclusive TRANSLATION STUDIES IN CHINA in the conception of *Zhongguo fanyi*, among other things (such as the worries of some scholars over the risk of Chinese translation studies losing its tradition and identity with the introduction of Western theories, worries considered to be ungrounded by Chang (2000:6) for example), has for too long kept Chinese translation studies from advancing a positive, critical, but constructive engagement with translation studies in other traditions. Xu (1997:6) made a strong point when he challenged: 'The effort we have made to understand and study foreign translation theories is not too much, but too little and too limited. To be honest, how much of the Western theories have those people studied and understood before they dismiss them?' (my translation)

In consequence to the misperception of the relationship between Chinese translation studies and translation studies in general, two camps seem to be emerging among Chinese translation scholars: one mixes Chinese translation studies with translation studies in China and is keen to defend the field against the "intrusion" of Western theories; the other takes Chinese translation studies as Chinese language/culture-related translation studies and is more ready to embark on general theoretical studies (see Chang 2000 for a critical description of the situation). Without a conceptual consensus about what Chinese translation studies is, a question has become a constant topic for heated discussions between the two camps: Are "foreign" theories applicable to Chinese translation studies? Or, are "foreign" theories relevant to the reality of Chinese translation?

Again, such a question reflects a simplistic approach to theories. Any attempt to answer it in terms of yes or no would reflect the same simplicity. If Chinese translation scholars either adopt a defensive position and dismiss "other" theories without giving them a serious thought, or are drawn to them just for their terminological novelty (a tendency that has been noted in Xu 1997:4), then it would not be surprising when Lao (1996:41) criticized Chinese translation studies by saying that 'the reality of our translation studies is that on the one hand there is a large amount of translation being carried out without theo-

retical guidance, and on the other there has been an endless line of hollow theories being produced in the field' (my translation). With hindsight, we may be able to point out that the so-called 'hollow theories' were not what we would mean by pure theory or 'Pure translation studies' in Holmes's (1988: 71ff) terms. (According to Chang 2000: 6, in Chinese translation studies what can be called pure theory is yet to be formulated). They have been deemed hollow because such theories tended to base themselves on impressionistic, anecdotal, or judgmental accounts, or what Neubert and Shreve (1992: 33) would call 'naive empiricism' that proceeds 'simply from entirely subjective descriptions of "what has worked for [individual pedagogues and translators]"'. Such so-called theories are 'hollow' because they are too self-contained, limited, or ad hoc to offer any consistent explanatory power, despite their shared national background with translation practice in China.

As such, what calls for more serious attention and effort in Chinese translation studies seems to be how to increase its compatibility with other academic disciplines at both conceptual and methodological levels, so as to enhance its objectivity, systematicity and applicability (cf. Tan 1997) for the long-term development of its explanatory power and theoretical sensibility. Some systematic and substantial efforts, to my knowledge, are being made by several research/ publishing institutions in China, which have initiated a few much needed projects in the past couple of years.[3]

4. Positioning Chinese translation studies

If we cease to view Chinese translation studies as a self-contained, unique type of translation studies, we will then be able to position it in the overall system of translation studies in the world. In this connection, we still find in Holmes (1988: 71ff) a viable framework of categorization to begin with.[4] In such a framework, Chinese translation studies, if pursued 'for its own sake' as language/culture-concerned, instead of *geographically* area-limited, theoretical research, can be positioned in the category of linguistic medium- and *cultural*-area-restricted Partial Translation Theories/Studies under Pure Translation Studies, which, if needs be, cuts across the boundaries of other types of partial theories such as rank-, text-type-, time-, and problem-restricted ones. In the field of Pure Translation Studies as against Applied Translation Studies, researchers of Chinese translation studies may commit themselves to *describing* product-, functional-, and/or process-oriented phenomena from the per-

spective of the history, reality and development of Chinese-related translation, which will in turn enrich world translation studies as an overarching system.

It is Pure Translation Studies sustained by a descriptive-explanatory research methodology that will provide a more solid intellectual platform for Chinese translation studies to enter a constructive critical engagement with other partial systems of translation studies of a similar kind; and insights offered by Chinese translation studies will help rendering General Translation Theory more comprehensive and truly general.

Like all other culturally area-restricted partial systems of translation studies, Chinese translation studies has alongside its pure and non-banausic branch an "applied" branch of studies which is more language-specific and practice-oriented. To make this branch of Applied Translation Studies more efficient in theorization and application, and thus more relevant to the practice of e.g. translation criticism and teaching, insights from Pure Translation Studies have to be enlisted as its philosophical grounding and operational rationale. (Reciprocally, pure and general theories can be tested for their validity and applicability in the applied domain). In this way, as I have argued elsewhere (Zhu 2002:30), Applied Translation Studies will provide 'a well-structured, well-grounded bridge between "theory" and "practice"'; and Chinese translation studies as a whole will develop into a comprehensive theoretical system, where students and practitioners 'will find not only descriptions of achievement but guidelines for improvement, not only what standards to adhere to but well-argued reasons for such adherence, and more importantly, well-explained methodologies to ensure the adherence'. In this way, the explanatory power offered by Chinese translation studies for Chinese translation teaching and criticism will no longer be confined to the time-honoured but naïve dichotomy of literal- and free-translation, that is, being less 'hollow' or haphazard but more consistent and constructive.

5.   Faithfulness-accessibility-elegance revisited: a possible interface for engagement

In the past century, a prevailing tenet of Chinese translation studies as translation studies in China and a major support for its claimed self-contained systematicity is the principle of a trinity of *xin-da-ya*, that is, faithfulness, accessibility (conventionally translated as "expressiveness", see the discussion below), and elegance, which was put forth by Yan (1896/1984; see Luo 1983/84; for a bi-

ographical account of Yan, see Delisle and Woodsworth 1995: 215–217) in the preface to his translation of T.H. Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*. Not meant by Yan himself to be a theory of translation as much as an observation of the 'three difficulties' of translation or as standards for an ideal translation, the trinity is so gnomically succinct that it has since catalyzed continuous exegetic attempts at verifying the origins of its components, as well as conceptual debates on their validity and feasibility.

Since the trinity has been generally held as the cornerstone and an important part of the heritage sustaining Chinese translation studies as a self-contained system, considerable research effort has been concentrated on its historical background. That is, whether it is an original insight from Yan's own experience and contemplation as a translator; or the pedigree runs from the stylistic tradition of the pre-Han (202 BC) prose through the practice of Buddhist scripture translation dated as far back as 224 AD in Chinese history (see Chen 1992: 15 and 119); or it is simply a paraphrase of Alexander Fraser Tytler's three general rules of adherence to the original text in idea, style, and ease of composition, or even a paraphrase of Herbert Rothenstein's 'Triness' of faithfulness, expressiveness and gracefulness (see Shen 1998: 119ff; Chen 1992: 124). Such exegetic exercises have been regarded as having some realistic significance for 'our present [effort]' to construct and develop Chinese (or China's?) translation theories (see Zhao 1996: 36, my translation).

Following the Chinese tradition of argumentation, to be sure, Yan himself has been too sententious to specify the origins of his hypothesis of the 'three difficulties' (He might have once hinted at the influence from Tytler, see Luo 1991: 159.), or to describe the relationship between the three components or theorize their applicability in translation practice. But one thing about the trinity is clear. That is, it has a large following among Chinese translation scholars and has survived a century's critical inquiry, despite Dong's (1950/84: 26) observation that such a 'hollow' set of principles is far from being a comprehensive theoretical system and that such a rather crude presentation of the trinity has provided no solution to real problems. However, too much emphasis on establishing the particularity of Chinese translation studies has prevented most researchers from viewing the matter from an international and intercultural perspective, and thus from getting to the universals behind the similarities between, say, Yan and Tytler. (An appeal for a broadened vision can be found in Shen 1998: 123, 145–148, though).

As a result, constant attempts have been made in Chinese translation studies to clarify the relationship and to justify the feasibility of the principles. One

of the tendencies seems to be pushing for *xin* or faithfulness, playing down *da* (conventionally translated as "expressiveness"), and backing off from *ya* or stylistic elegance (for a description of the situation, see Luo 1983/84 and Shen 1998: ch.3; and for a criticism see Wu 1997). Yet if informed by modern or "imported" disciplines such as functional linguistics, language philosophy, and studies of communication, for instance, we would be in a better position to take the trinity as a comprehensive whole instead of weighing the components against each other as discrete approaches to translation.

For instance, without *da*, whose most basic meaning is "reaching", the faithfulness would be limited to the relationship between the translator and the target text formulation induced by the source text, without giving due attention to the status and role of the target text reader in the communicational act enabled by such a target text. On the premise of faithfulness perceived as such, *da*, as its conventional English translation indicates, is construed as "expressive(ness)", which implies a concern with the expressing act on the part of the information sender (i.e. the author through the source text and the translator through the target text); while a more comprehensive conceptualization of *da* as "reaching" should include reception as part of the act of getting the textualized information across to the receiver. This will suggest an English translation of *da* as "accessible/accessibility" (see Zhu 1996: 345 for a preliminary discussion of the trinity within the framework of functional linguistics and speech act theory).[5] On the other hand, Wong (1999), from the perspective of intentionality and ideology informed by non-Chinese theories, has 'reinterpreted' *ya* as Yan's desired means for achieving the intended goal of *xin* and *da* (p. 85), while the deprecatory commentary on *ya* by the leftist critics in the 1930s is viewed in essence as an 'anachronistic' fallacy of imposing a communistic ideology of serving the less-educated populace on a text (or the producer of such a text) "elegantly" rendered at the turn of the last century (p. 86).

As we have tried to illustrate above, by taking Chinese translation studies as an open system within the overarching system of translation studies, we can be more ready to study the reality, construction, and development of the discipline for translation studies' own sake. That is, to discover, describe, and interpret any ontological similarities as well as dissimilarities between different observations and presentations of translational phenomena, such as those by Yan and Tytler, within the multidisciplinary framework provided by intellectual insights available in today's academic world.

6.   Some Concluding Remarks

Chinese translation studies, based in a 'less-translated' (source) language that is spoken in one country or in a limited number of regions, used to be not so communicative on the international scene. The fact may have encouraged the claim that Chinese translation studies, with its particular lingual and cultural concerns at the applied level, should be studied as a self-contained system—an approach that would turn the system into one of the 'multiple "global" theoretical constructs based on purely "local" understandings of a [translational] phenomenon', a theoretical particularism that according to Neubert and Shreve is partially responsible for 'the lack of consensus in translation studies' (Neubert and Shreve 1992: 11).

As observed in this paper, the situation has highlighted the need for clarifying the identity of *Zhongguo fanyi* ('China translation') conceived in its native Chinese language: Should it refer to translation studies developed in China as a geopolitical entity, or should it cover Chinese language/culture-related translation studies conducted in the world at large? With its semantic fuzziness the Chinese term does not give a well-defined indication. In this study, we have argued that it is more realistic and feasible to construe *Zhongguo fanyi* as an open system of Chinese translation studies,[6] so that it will be more ready to contribute to, as well as avail itself of, the research resources of the inter-lingual/cultural system of translation studies, which by definition represents a coalescence of all the partial systems including Chinese translation studies.

Notes

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1. As an example, around 200 French authors have been introduced to the Chinese readership through translation, according to She (1996). There have been more than ten published Chinese translations of Stendhal's *le Rouge et le Noir*, and four modern Chinese translations of *La dame aux camélias* by Alexandre Dumas were published in the early 1990s. Apart from major Western literatures, Japanese and Indian literatures have been actively translated into Chinese as well (Liu 1996).

2. Our small-scale pilot research project (2000–01), 'Translation Studies in China: Towards an international and interactive perspective on its current debates, tendencies and future

development' (Project No. 9030789–590, funded by the City University of Hong Kong) has surveyed 22 foreign-language and university journals in the PRC. Among the 8,644 articles published between 1996 and 1999, a total of 2,572 are about translation. Among these translation-related articles, a total of 458, or 18% are found to be worth closer perusal for their theoretical relevance and academic insights.

3. For example, *A Series of Translation Studies Outside China* (Hubei Education Publishing House 2000–) has featured translation theories developed in America, Britain, France, and Russia; and a series of overseas translation studies published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press (2004) has included 29 English monographs by authors such as Bassnett, Hatim, Nord, Newmark and Wilss.

4. Holmes's (1988: 71ff) framework can be outlined as follows:
 – Translation Studies can primarily be divided into two categories: (1) Pure Translation Studies, that is, 'research pursued for its own sake'; and (2) Applied Translation Studies that concerns itself with areas such as translation teaching and translation criticism.
 – Pure Translation Studies can be further divided into (1) Descriptive Translation Studies which are product-, functional, and/or process-oriented; and (2) Theoretical Translation Studies that consists of General Translation Theory and Partial Translation Theories (which, in turn, includes medium-, area-, rank-, text-type-, time-, and problem-restricted theories).

5. The author wishes to thank M.A.K. Halliday for the discussion during his visit to the City University of Hong Kong in May 2001 about the English translation of *da* and the relevance between the trinity and the ideational, interpersonal and textual functions of language.

6. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Zhu 2000), *Zhongguo fanyi* in this broad sense can be more appropriately termed as *zhongwen fanyi* ('Chinese language/literature/culture translation').

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Abstract

The paper begins with an observation of the paradoxical status of Chinese as a less-translated source language but a much-translated target language, and that of Chinese translation studies as a much studied subject in China but a little-noted branch of translation studies in the world. It then analyzes the implications of the two current conceptions of Chinese translation studies: either (1) as a self-contained system of "translation studies in China", with China construed as a geopolitical body; or (2) as an open system of "Chinese language/culture-related translation studies", with the Chinese as a nation, a linguistic and cultural entity in an anthropological sense. It points out that the first, exclusive conception has for too long kept Chinese translation studies from advancing a positive engagement with translation studies in other traditions, encouraging polarization of Chinese and non-Chinese translation studies into two opposite systems; while the second, inclusive conception relates the discipline more closely to other fields of Chinese-related academic study in the world, as well as translation studies in other languages/cultures. As such, Chinese translation studies, alongside an "applied" parallel which is more language-specific and practice-oriented, represents a linguistically medium- and culturally area-restricted branch of Partial Translation Studies under Pure Translation Studies. To substantiate its argument, the paper shows how the two conceptions may have influenced the interpretation of the time-honoured tenet of faithfulness-accessibility-elegance in Chinese translation studies for its conceptual sensibility and explanatory power.

Résumé

L'article commence par souligner le statut paradoxal du chinois, qui est une langue-source moins traduite mais une langue-cible fréquemment traduite, et dont les études de traduction chinoises constituent un sujet fréquemment étudié en Chine mais une section peu cotée de la traductologie dans le monde. Il analyse ensuite les implications des deux conceptions actuelles de la traductologie chinoise : soit (1) un système indépendant «de traductologie en Chine», la Chine étant considérée comme un organe géopolitique ; soit (2) un système ouvert «d'études de traduction liées à la langue et à la culture chinoises», les Chinois étant une nation, une entité linguistique et culturelle au sens anthropologique du terme.

Il montre que la première conception exclusive a trop longtemps empêché la traductologie chinoise d'avancer un engagement positif avec les études de traduction dans d'autres traditions, en encourageant la polarisation de la traductologie chinoise et non-chinoise en deux systèmes opposés ; tandis que la seconde conception inclusive rapproche la discipline plus étroitement d'autres domaines d'études académiques liées au chinois dans le monde, ainsi que des autres études de traduction dans d'autres langues et cultures.

En tant que telle, la traductologie chinoise, à côté d'un parallèle «appliqué» qui est plus spécifique à la langue et orienté vers la pratique, représente un moyen linguistique et une branche culturellement limitée à un domaine d'études partielles de traduction dans les études de traduction pures. Pour étayer son argument, l'article montre comment les deux conceptions peuvent avoir influencé l'interprétation du principe, consacré par l'usage, de la fidélité — accessibilité — élégance dans la traductologie chinoise pour sa sensibilité conceptuelle et son pouvoir explicatif.

About the author

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