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LIN SHU: TRANSLATING FOR THE CHINESE EMPEROR

Chinese writers have used translation to revitalize indigenous traditions and refashion cultural identities, especially during moments of social crisis. The turn of the twentieth century offers a remarkably rich instance of Chinese translators intent on building a national culture by importing foreign literatures.

Between 1882 and 1913, the quantity of fiction issued by Chinese publishers increased dramatically, and translations constituted almost two-thirds of the total: 628 out of 1,170 books. The most influential translator was the prolific Lin Shu (1852-1924), credited with rendering as many as 180 Western literary texts, including the novels of Daniel Defoe, Victor Hugo, Sir Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Lin himself knew no Western languages. Rather, as was customary in late Qing publishing, he worked with proficient collaborators whose oral versions he quickly turned into classical Chinese prose (*wenyan*). His translation practice was thoroughly domesticating: he chose foreign texts that could be easily Sinicized, assimilated to traditional Chinese values, notably the archaic literary language and family-centered Confucian ethics. Lin read Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* as an exemplum of the Confucian reverence for filial piety, so he retitled his 1908 version, *The Story of The Filial Daughter Nell*. The foreign text that initiated his career in 1899 was Dumas fils's sentimental romance, *La dame aux camélias*, which he much appreciated because he believed it treated the Confucian theme of loyalty with extravagant emotion. Lin drew a startling analogy between Dumas's heroine, the courtesan Marguerite, and two ministers distinguished by their legendary devotion, revealing that the Chinese values he inscribed in foreign texts were not simply traditional, but imperial, expressing loyalty to the Qing emperor.

Lin Shu chose to serve the emperor as a writer instead of a minister because his failure to attain the highest academic degree discouraged him from seeking a court appointment. The *wenyan* and Confucianism of his translations were intended to strengthen imperial culture just as its authority was being severely eroded by political developments. Although China had been subject to Western military and commercial invasion since the early nineteenth century, Lin's translations began appearing just after the Chinese were decisively defeated in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) and the Boxer Uprising against the foreign presence was repressed by an international force (1898-1900).

Perhaps most importantly, Lin continued translating long after 1905, when the abolition of the civil service examination removed the main institutional support for using classical Chinese in official and educated discourse. Late Qing translators such as Lin Shu considered themselves to be preservers of the language and therefore of classical Chinese civilization.

Introducing Western ideas

Interestingly, the domestic cultural and political agenda that guided their work did not entirely efface the differences of the foreign texts. On the contrary, the drive to domesticate was also intended to introduce rather different Western ideas and forms so that China could be able to compete internationally and struggle against the hegemonic countries.

Between 1907 and 1921, for instance, Lin Shu translated 25 novels by Rider Haggard because he found them consistent with Confucian ethics and supportive of his aim to reform the Chinese nation. Lin retitled his version of Haggard's *Montezuma's Daughter* as *The Story of an English Filial Son's Revenge on The Volcano* since he read it as another Confucian exemplum, proof that "he who knows how to fulfill filial obligations by avenging the murder of his mother certainly knows how to be loyal and to avenge the shame of his mother country."

Lin knew that British colonialism provided the subtext to Haggard's adventure fiction. But he nonetheless believed that representations of

colonial aggression could move Chinese readers both to emulate and resist their foreign invaders. In the preface to his version of Haggard's *The Spirit of Bambatse*, he provocatively adopted the racist stereotyping in such novels to explain that they encourage the white man's spirit of exploration. The blue-print has already been drawn by Columbus and Robinson Crusoe. In order to seek almost unobtainable material interests in the barbarian regions, white men are willing to brave a hundred deaths. But our nation, on the contrary, disregards its own interests and yields them to foreigners. We have invited the guests to humiliate the hosts and to subject a multitude of 400 million to the mercy of a few whites. What an ugly shame!

This racial thinking was contradicted by Lin's very reliance on translation as a means of national reform. He admired Western individualism and aggressiveness, but in resorting to a literary practice to encourage the Chinese imitation of these values, he effectively assumed that the asymmetry between the West and China wasn't determined biologically, but culturally. It derived from the differences in their ethical traditions, which, unlike racial differences, could be revised. The traditional wisdom preempted thinking about the Chinese nation by discouraging patriotic feelings such as a collective sense of shame at foreign invasion.

The translator as reformist

The practices of late Qing translators demonstrate that domesticating strategies, especially when used in situations of cultural and political dependence, can still result in a powerful hybridity that sets going unanticipated changes. The drive to domesticate was inexorable, given the insularity of traditional Chinese culture and its centuries-long entrenchment in imperial institutions. Consequently, Lin Shu saw himself as a reformist, not a revolutionary. He used the classical literary language to appeal to the academic and official elite, and he submitted foreign texts to rewriting, abridgement, and interpolated comment so that Western values and his own nationalist agenda might become acceptable to that elite. In his translating, he was more faithful to *wenyan* than to Western ideas and forms.

Yet this very practice of assimilating foreign texts to the dominant domestic style was gleaned from the Western translation tradition. Late Qing translators found their criteria for good translation-fidelity (*xin*), clarity or comprehensibility (*da*), and elegance or Xuency (*ya*)–in the British theorist Alexander Tytler. His *Essay on the Principles of Translation* (1789) advocated sufficient freedom to produce eminently readable English versions, endowed with the "ease of original composition" because they appeared familiar to Tytler's elite readers, invisibly inscribed with the aesthetic and moral values of the Hanoverian bourgeoisie.

The Western domestication favored by late Qing translators made their work more accessible than they planned and not always in terms they would have endorsed. Lin Shu not only cultivated highly elegant styles, but added illuminating prefaces, marginalia and punctuation to clarify the *wenyan*. His translation of *La dame aux camélias* was enormously popular well into the 1930s, reaching an educated readership that included officials as well as academics, secondary school students as well as independent intellectuals. Lin's versions of sentimental romances didn't consistently transform filial piety into patriotism. They also fed into the craze for escapist novels of tragic love, the so-called Mandarin Ducks and Butterfly fiction that dominated Chinese publishing at the time, providing a compensatory comfort for readers faced with disruptive cultural and political events: Westernization, the 1911 revolution against the emperor, the institution of the republican government. The wide circulation enabled the translations, despite their classical language, to contribute to the emergence of a cultural discourse in the northern Mandarin vernacular (*baihua*). Inadvertently, Lin's work questioned the authority of *wenyan*: his technique of revising foreign-language texts implied that classical Chinese was unable to absorb and communicate foreign knowledge.

Source : Ce portrait a été publié dans la revue *Circuit* (n° 58, 1997, p. 17-18) de l'Ordre des traducteurs et interprètes agréés du Québec dans la chronique «Pages d'histoire» dirigée par Pierre Cloutier. Lawrence Venuti

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