

The Influence of Ideology on the Translation of Mao Zedong's Poems

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Abstract

Mao Zedong's poems hold an important place in the history of Chinese literature. From the perspective of 'manipulation theory', the paper aims at exploring the influences that ideology exerted on the translation of Mao Zedong's poems. These influences have manifested themselves mainly in such aspects as the organization of translation activity, the selection of source texts, the comprehension of the texts and the freedom translators enjoy in rendering the poems.

Introduction

Translation is viewed as a product of history, society and culture, and there always exists a social context in which the translation activity can't escape the influence of nonlinguistic variables and factors. Andre Lefevere, one of the major advocates of the 'cultural turn' in Translation Studies and one of the most influential thinkers of the discipline, connected the study of translation to power and patronage, ideology and poetics, and he put forward the thesis that the study of translation is a social and historical study. Social background and ideology must therefore be considered. In the light of manipulation theory of the ideological influence on translation, the paper studies the influences that ideology has exerted on the translation of poems written by Mao Zedong (or Mao Tsetung).

Mao Zedong's Poems

As a prominent statesman, distinctive strategist, brilliant thinker and great leader of the Chinese Communist Party and the New China,

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Mao Zedong (1893-1976) has influenced generations of people throughout the world. However, this unique status that distinguishes him from his predecessors and contemporaries lies not merely in his revolutionary accomplishments, but also in his literary achievements. The poetry Mao created during his political practice of more than five decades constitutes the peak of classical Chinese poetry, occupying as it does an important place in the history of Chinese literature. They are not only a brilliant record of history, but also a crystallization of wisdom abounding in philosophic implications. The poems are a poetic representation of Mao Zedong Thought, and his rich experience of revolutionary struggle also provides an inexhaustible source for his poetry.

Mao's poems not only inherit the fine qualities of classical Chinese poems, but also make some innovations. Though a lover and master of classical Chinese poetry, a traditional genre of Chinese poems, Mao proves convincingly that classical Chinese poetry can fully reflect modern life and serve realism by filling classical Chinese poems with fresh new ideas and artistic conceptions conforming to the traditional tonal patterns and rhyme schemes.

Mao's poetic works are a vivid reflection of his literary or artistic ideas, and a harmonious integration of revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism. With the lofty ideas, profound philosophy and artistic representation, it is no wonder that people world wide appreciate and cherish Mao's poems.

The English Versions of Mao's Poems Published in China

Mao's personal charm and the great appeal of Chinese literature have inspired many people at home and abroad to translate Mao's poems into different languages. Of all the foreign versions the world has read, those made by the Chinese translators are undoubtedly the most authoritative.

So far as the English versions are concerned, the scene is stimulating. The earliest version was *18 Poems of Mao Zedong* published in *Chinese Literature* Vol. 3, 1958. This version was co-translated by Ye Junjian and Yu Baoju and the source texts were published in *Shikan* or *Poetry*, a prestigious magazine of Chinese poetry. Closely following this, in September 1958, *19 Poems of Chairman Mao* was published by Foreign Language Press in Beijing. In addition to those in *18 Poems of Mao Zedong*, the poem *The Immortal - Reply to Li Shuyi* was included in the English version for the first time.

In 1960s, a special translation censorship group of outstanding Chinese and foreign scholars was officially organized to ensure an elegant and faithful translation of the poems. Through conscientious consultancy and finetuning and polishing for the sake of both accuracy and expressiveness, the translation group brought out a revised draft titled *Mao Tsetung Poems* which comprised 37 poems and was published by Foreign Languages Press in 1976. Compared with the former versions, this one enjoyed much more acclaim from the academic community and common readers. As a result, this version was called the 'official' version and became the source text for versions of other foreign languages.

Besides the above, there are some other English versions. In 1978, Wu Xianglin completed his *39 Poems of Chairman Mao* which was published for inside circulation only in Nanjing University. In 1992, Zhao Zengtao published his *Mao Zedong Poems*. As Mao's centennial birth anniversary fell in 1993, several translators came up with their new versions such as Huang Long's *An English Version of Mao's Poems*, Xu Yuanchong's *Selected Poems of Mao Zedong*, Gu Zhengkun's *Poems of Mao Zedong with Rhymed Versions and Annotations*.

The Influence of Ideology on the Translation of Mao's Poems

Ideology is,

a conceptual grid that consists of opinions and attitudes deemed acceptable in a certain society at a certain time, and through which readers and translators approach texts.

(Lefevere 2004:5)

The study of translation is a social, historical study in itself and therefore social background and ideology must be considered. However, there are different ideologies in different historical times and in different cultural contexts and, different translators at different historical times have different understandings of the political implications and artistic features in *Mao Zedong's Poems*. This has resulted in the production of different versions. In the following sections the author provides an analysis of the influences that ideology has exerted on different English versions of *Mao Zedong's poems*.

- **The Special Translation Censorship Group in China**

The English version of *Mao Zedong's Poems* in 1976 was completed by an intellectual collaboration. It was considered as the highest achievement of literary translation during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when the translation of *Mao Zedong's Poems* took on the dual task of literary export and ideological export (Ma Shikui 2006:19-20). Because of Mao's unique position and special quality of the source text, the method and procedure of translating his poems in this period of time are different from that of other ordinary literary works, and the version of 1976 also has different traits from other English versions in some aspects.

(1) Selection of poems

Any translation activity has its purpose, either to serve special groups or to satisfy translator's own interests, preferences and ideological predilections. But whatever they are for, the publication of

translated texts must meet the demands of patronage as well as expectation horizons of the publisher and the society. It is closely related to the acceptance of target readers and target readers' ideology. To translate *Mao Zedong's Poems* into English is to introduce to foreign people its poetic art, Mao Zedong Thought and modern Chinese culture. Foreign translation of Mao's poems can gain its ends of exporting domestic ideology in a relatively acceptable literary form. The 1976 version produced against this special historical background accordingly became the literary text with a special political mission, and its production reflected the requirement of 'ultimate version' which represented the source society's authoritative views to some extent.

(2) Political mission

The methods and strategies of translation depend on the status of the original writer, the quality of the original text and the historical background of the translation activity. Mao Zedong was the top leader of New China during the period when translation activity occurred and its participants were all professionals working in China, the methods and strategies of translating Mao's poems during this period of time were different from other literary works. Translating Mao's poems during the Cultural Revolution was a serious political mission. It was organized by the central government, every move of the translation group being directed by the government. It was published by the prestigious official publishing agency in China. The attention that was paid to translating Mao's poems is very rare in modern history of translation. The organization of the translation was similar to those of religious and political classics such as the translation of Buddhist sutras in ancient China, the early translation of the *Bible* in Europe, the translation of the works of Karl Marx into Chinese in new China and the foreign translations of *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*.

(3) The Translation Group

During the Cultural Revolution, translation of Mao's poems was carried out in a collective way. In early 1960s, a translation censorship group was organized, among which were Yuan Shuipai,

Qiao Guanhua, Qian Zhongshu, Zhao Chupu, Ye Junjian and English expert Suul Adler. The group was responsible for revising old translations, and translating the newly-published poems. During this period the work of the translation group was stopped several times and it was not resumed until 1974. Because of Mao's unique position and special quality of the source texts, the visage of translation of Mao's poems was to a certain degree related to the image of China and the leader Mao himself in the foreign culture. Compared to the translation of other works, creating the English version of Mao's poems was more complicated in method and more demanding in the quality. In the attempt of creating an 'official' version in 1976, the translation activity was regarded as holy and sacred. The members of the translation group were all authorities from different backgrounds. As for the assignment of tasks, Qian Zhongshu, a great scholar who had taken part in the translation of *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, and Ye Junjian, a renowned translator and the editor-in-chief of *Chinese Literature*, were in charge of translating; Qiao Guanhua, working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Yuan Shuipai, a poet and translator and the head of the group, shouldered the duty of elaborating the poems, and Suul Adler polished the English versions. The translation and revision of 'official' version in 1976 nearly copied the practice of the English version of *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*. It was further proved that translating Mao's poems had its political dimension (Wu Xianglin 1978:1).

- **The Russian Version in 1957**

In January 1957, the Chinese magazine *Poetry* edited chiefly by Zang Kejia was published. In the magazine's inaugural issue, Mao Zedong's *Eighteen Classical Poems* were officially published, so did Mao's *A Letter About Poetry* written in January 12th 1957. This was the first time when Mao agreed to officially publish his poetic works which were examined, and transcribed personally. The publication begot strong reactions at home and abroad, and it was the former Soviet Union that first introduced it immediately to the world. In September 1957, the earliest foreign translation of *Mao Zedong's poems*, the

Russian version of *Eighteen Poems of Mao Zedong*, was published in Moscow by *Pravda*, a leading newspaper and an official organ of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Soviet Union was the first country that recognized and established diplomatic relations with the new China. In the light of the international situation and out of consideration of strategies, the first generation of leaders of new China adopted the policy of following the Soviet Union. In the 1950s, the two nations maintained a good relation of fraternal parties and allies and had close cooperation in the economic and cultural fields. In the early 1950s, the Soviet Union put forward the literary principle of 'social realism'. In that entire decade, the principle became a political tool with which literary and artistic creations were manipulated. Literary translation was no exception. The mainstream ideology in both China and Soviet Union asked the translators to introduce 'artistically excellent' and 'politically progressive' literary works. On the scale of political ideology in the 1950s, the so-called 'artistically excellent' and 'politically progressive' works were those that accorded with socialistic and communistic ideology and reflected realism in the way of production, especially the writing principle of socialistic realism. And *Mao Zedong's poems* to be translated were, no doubt, in accordance with this standard. Influenced by the political ideology of the time, the translators of the Soviet Union paid close attention to the publication of Mao's poems, and the Russian versions came out shortly after the publication of the Chinese versions.

- **Acceptance of *Mao Zedong's Poems* in Asia, Africa and Latin America**

As a great patriot and internationalist, Mao Zedong displayed devout care for the Chinese people, but also expressed in his poems sympathy and support for all nations around the world, especially the weaker nations and people facing oppression and bullying. In his poem *Kun Lun* produced during the Long March, Mao Zedong wrote:

How could I wield a heaven-high sword,
 Cutting you in three to afford
 One piece to Europe,
 One piece to America,
 And the final piece to Asia.
 Ah, what a peaceful world we would see,
 And alike warm and cold the earth would be!

(Gu Zhengkun:87-88)

He would use ‘a heaven-high sword’ to rebuild the freezing and snowy Mountain Kun Lun, to make the globe ‘alike warm and cold’ and to realize his lofty ideal of human equality.

Mao Zedong’s unbounded feelings became stronger as he approached old age. His wonderful lines such as “the Golden Monkey wrathfully swung his massive cudgel, / and the jade-like firmament was cleared out of dust”, “only heroes can quell tigers and leopards, / and wild bears never daunt the brave” and “the Four Seas are rising, clouds and waters raging, / the Five Continents are rocking, wind and thunder roaring”, not only showed the heroic spirit and national spirit of the Chinese, but also expressed scorn and indignation for the violent act of international hegemonism of that time. They not only bestowed enthusiastic praise for liberation movement and the storm of people’s revolution in the developing countries like Asia, Africa and Latin America, but also delivered passionate blessing and eager anticipation to national independence and social progress of the third world people.

In June 1960 when Mao Zedong received the delegation from Cuba, Brazil and Argentina, a foreign guest said:

One fact that the imperialists haven’t noticed is that
 Chairman Mao’s poems are spreading widely in Latin
 America and becoming very popular.

And he also earnestly requested creation of more pieces (Jin Chen 1997:15). In his statement after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, Bhutto, the ex-president of Pakistan, passionately said:

His name will forever be used synonymously with the great, just undertaking of the poor and the oppressed, be a brilliant symbol of people's fights against opposing the oppression and exploitation, colonialism and imperialism. And our Pakistan will memorialize immortal Mao Zedong with great reverence for ever.

(Jin Chen 1997:20)

Mao Zedong's poems left behind the greatest intellectual treasures of opposing oppression: advancing bravely and unceasingly, self-improvement for the third world people.

- **The Translator's freedom to translate *Mao's Poems* after reform and opening-up**

After the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of CPC in 1978, the starting point from which China implemented the policy of opening to the outside world, not a few different English versions of *Mao Zedong's Poems* have been published in mainland China. The translation of Mao's poems took on a new pattern of multi-subject, multi-style and multi-publication.

In the wake of reform and opening up to the outside world, policies concerning intellectuals and literatures have been liberalized drastically. The idea of 'let a hundred flowers blossom and let a hundred schools of thought contend', a policy set forth by Mao in 1956, was received and enriched in the 1978 constitution. With political restrictions being lifted, art could be pursued for its own sake. More and more literary works came to the fore and a new round of translation activities was triggered. People began to realize the real value of literary translation as a work of art. In this climate of literary liberalism, there came a set of translations of *Mao Zedong's Poems*, which have many new traits when compared with the 'official' version in 1976. Under the influence of social ideology in that particular period, the translators of the 'official' version consequently attached disproportionate importance to adherence to the political content and philosophic connotations at the cost of artistic qualities.

Three-Beauty Theory of translating poetry—beauty in sense, beauty in sound and beauty in form—is put forward by Prof. Xu Yuanchong, which serves as a guiding theory for poetry translation. As a distinguished translator of poetry, Prof. Xu pursued this theory of his in his translation of Mao Zedong's poems, which also revealed his pursuit of perfection. *Mao Zedong Poems* by Zhao Zengtao translated Chinese metrical poems into English metrical verse, and was considered to exactly express “the excellent taste of character of Mao Zedong's poems”.

Conclusion

It is easy to see that ideology has exerted its influence on the translations of Mao Zedong's poems. These influences have manifested themselves in its every aspect including the organization of translation activity, the selection of source texts, the comprehension of the text and the application of translation strategies. As a bridge between different cultures, translation is not only a linguistic exchange but a site of cultural give and take, in which ideology could also be at play. When commenting on the translated texts, the translation critics should not only lay emphasis on the ‘linguistic fidelity’ to the source text but consider those language-external factors from a macroscopic perspective.

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