

Original Paper

A Study on the Upsurge of Translated Detective Story from the Perspective of Polysystem Theory

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Abstract

From 1890s to 1930s, the detective novels carried a big weight in Chinese literary works, with the characteristics of mass audience, large quantity and deep influence. Since detective novels were originally imported and translated into Chinese by translator, they have attracted the attention of a large of scholars. Base on the polysystem theory proposed by Itamar Even-Zohar, an Israeli literary theorist, this paper will analyze the reason for the rise and the increasing popularity of translated detective novel in that period.

Keywords

detective novel, translation, polysystem theory

1. Introduction

As a kind of popular novels, detective novel was initiated by famous American writer Allen Poe in 1841, and it had constantly enriched and improved by many excellent writers. As a matter of fact, western literary has created a large number of detective novels that are still world-famous up to today. Traditional Chinese literary knew only stories based on court cases, and had no detective novel in the modern sense until 1890s. The Chinese Progress published four stories of *Sherlock Holmes* translated by its editor from 1896 to 1897, and it was regraded as the beginning of detective novel in China. Subsequently, a great quantity of western detective novels was translated into Chinese, and detective novels became one of the most popular reading materials at that time. Seeing the unprecedented prosperity about detective novel, many writers, translator, and even publisher tried to create original detective novels in the following years. Detective novel can never be ignored in literary from 1890s to 1930s.

Israeli literary theorist Itamar Even-Zohar proposed the polysystem theory in 1970s, and the term “polysystem” was officially pointed out in *Papers in Historical Poetics* in 1978. Based on Russian formalist literary theory, polysystem theory also absorbed the positive factors of structuralism, general

system theory and cultural semiotics. According to Even-Zohar, polysystem refers to the aggregation of various literary system in a particular culture, from advance or classic form (poetry with innovative significance for instance) to low-level or non-classical form (like children's literature, popular novel, etc.) (Xie, 2003).

Polysystem theory regards various social symbolic phenomena, specifically all forms of human communication dominated by symbols, such as language, culture, ideology, politics as independent systems rather than a mixture composed of disparate elements. At the same time, they also exist in a common system, that is, a polysystem composed of several different subsystems (Zohar, 2002). The polysystem includes the central system in the leading position and other systems at the edge, and these systems in polysystem are both competitive and interdependent. Generally speaking, the system that has just entered the polysystem is usually in a marginal position, and it is restricted by the central system. Therefore, their positions are not fixed, and there is a never-ending struggle. The system at the center is likely to be driven to the edge, while the system at the edge is likely to seize the center. Subsequently, the new system can challenge the central system and stand a chance to replace the central system as the leader of this polysystem.

2. Brief Introduction about Detective Novel from 1890s to 1930s

As mentioned above, detective novels were not born in China but imported into China after being translated in 1890s. China's early detective novel are divided into two categories: foreign detective novels translated by translators from 1890s and original-created detective novels imitated by Chinese people around the Revolution of 1911.

2.1 Translated Detective Novels at the Beginning

In the history of China, there have been three translation climaxes, namely, Buddhism translation from the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Song Dynasty, scientific translation from the late Ming Dynasty to the early Qing Dynasty, and the western learning from the Opium War to the May 4th Movement. In terms of time, 1890s was in the third climax. At that time, a large number of literature works, including novels, were translated into China. Since the Opium War in 1840, Western powers have invaded China continuously, and the corruption of Qing government had reached its peak. China was on the verge of social unrest and economic collapse. People were deeply oppressed by feudal system and Western powers. Therefore, popular literary works such as scientific novel, political novel and detective novel prevailed at that time. Through reading such novels, Chinese people felt the charm of democracy, science and fairness. Indulged in such novels, they were able to get a temporary escape in this cruel but real society. Due to its artistic charm of being close to life, detective novel had been popular with the intellectual and the masses, naturally it became the mainstream of translated works. At that time, it was almost impossible that one translator had no relationship with detective novel (Ah Ying, 1980). If there were thousands of translated novels, detective novels would account for more than five hundredths.

In 1896, with the publication of Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* in *The Chinese Progress*, the series of *Sherlock Holmes* stories entered China and the western detective novel was firstly introduced to Chinese readers. Although *The Chinese Progress* only published four stories, its huge circulation also caused a sensation at that time. By analyzing the court case novel and western detective novel, we can find that they not only have some similarities, but exist obvious differences, which are mainly reflected in the plot emphasis, characterization, narrative method and creative intention (Zhan, 2020). At the beginning, the number of translated detective novel was small, and they were mainly concentrated in Conan Doyle's works. Then, with the rise of various newspapers and novel magazines, the market demand of detective novel has been greatly increased, and the number of translated novel have also highly enriched. From 1902 to 1918, 331 works of Conan Doyle were translated, and the works of other foreign detective novelists, such as Bafo, Arthur Morrison and William Graham, were gradually translated and published. Taking the Magazine *The All-story Monthly* as an example, it had published more than 40 translated novel, and the most of which are detective novel, accounting for 21 (Zhang, 2009).

At the beginning, only two or three translators who took detective novel as the main translation genre. As the detective novel had found its way to Chinese literature, more than forty translators threw themselves into the translation of detective novel, becoming a huge translation group. Translators in that period adopted the domestication translation strategy to cater to the readers' reading habits and facilitate public acceptance. In 1890s, China was in the midst of domestic trouble and foreign invasion, and Chinese intellectuals were eager to seek a way out of the West. Because of its strong interest and the new ideology it conveyed, detective novel were used by advanced intellectuals as an effective tool to enlighten people. However, as we all known, ordinary people had limited level of knowledge, so in order to make people read detective novel as much as possible, translators had to cater to Chinese reading habits by making some changes in translation, such as replacing the first-person narrative with third-person narrative and omitting the description of mind and scenery.

2.2 Early Original-created Detective Novel around the Revolution of 1911

As detective novels were imported into China, those writers who both owned profound traditional cultural knowledge and a little knowledge about foreign literature had tried to create detective novel with their own understanding of detective novel. This represented the initial integration of court case novels and detective novels, and was also the initial imitation of detective novel by Chinese literati.

Some novelists began to write detective novels by their own, but because of the deep influence of court case novels and the social constraints, the so-called detective novels in this period were more or less in the shadow of course case novels. Take *Chun E Shi* as an example, it was a novel with the characteristics of both court case novel and detective novel. It seemed that this novel described a traditional court case story, but it was different from the previous court case novels. The image of honest officials no longer existed, but the corruption of the officials was exposed. Moreover, it owned many elements of detective novel. First of all, the novel focused on detecting rather than adjudicating. Secondly, the author designed two absolutely opposite clues to attract readers to refer, reason and think, which was the basic feature of

detective novel. Finally, the vital role in solving the case and finding out the truth was not an official, but a private detective. It was also an important feature of detective novel (Li, 2006). Although many scholars attempted to create detective novel by their own, but unluckily none of them had realized this goal.

The 1911 Revolution ended the feudal system that had ruled China for more than two thousand years and established a bourgeois republic country, thus making the court case novels lose the social conditions for existence. Then, detective novel gradually got rid of the bondage and simple imitation of court case novels, and walked out a Chinese characteristic pattern.

3. Reasons for the Upsurge of Detective Novels from the Perspective of Polysystem Theory

The previous part mentions that detective novels in China from 1890s to 1930s are mainly divided into translated detective novels and early originally-created detective novel, and both of them are popular with readers at that time. There are many reasons for the prevalence of detective novels, such as politics, culture, economy, etc. This part will analyze the reasons for the rise of detective novel from the perspective of polysystem theory.

3.1 The Influence of Various Social Factors

The polysystem theory holds that translated literature, as a system in the target language polysystem, is interdependent with other systems and is also influenced by other systems in the polysystem, such as political factors, economic factors and cultural factors. The prevalence of translated detective novels was the result of many social factors. First of all, political factor gave rise to initiate translated detective novel in China. Since 1840s, the ambition of the Western powers to carve up China was increasingly intensified, and China was in a critical moment of internal troubles and foreign invasion. Along with the invasion of Western power, science and civilization also set off a series of reforms and movements in China. From the 1860s to the 1890s, the Westernization carried out the famous Westernization movement to maintain the rule of the Qing government. The emphasis of translation was on science, technology and concrete objects at that period, and literature was ignored at the corner. With the failure of a series of reforms, such as the Sino-Japanese Naval Battle and the Hundred Days Reform, advanced intellectuals realized the importance of ideological enlightenment of the masses. They believed that literature played a vital role in politics and was the best means to improve thought. Many intellectuals chose to translate Western novels that were most acceptable to the common people, hoping to enlighten the people and save the motherland from domestic troubles and foreign invasions. Political factor not only promoted the occurrence and popularity of detective novels in China, but also was one of the purposes that detective novels wanted to achieve.

In addition, economic factors have accelerated the boom of detective novels in China. From the 1840s, Western novels were widely translated into China. People saw the new and perfect democratic system in political novels, appreciated the powerful and beautiful science and technology in scientific novels, and obtained the fair legal system and rights protection in detective novels (Zhang, 2009). Detective novels were characterized by distinctive characters, interlocking plots and sufficient suspense, which made them irresistible and popular among many translated novels. In the bargain, China's printing technology improved at the end of the 19th century, so Chinese newspaper industry and publishing industry developed rapidly. There was once a magazine craze and a small-sized newspaper craze in Chinese literary world, with numerous magazines springing up one after another. The four modern novel magazines, *The New Novel*, *The Tapestry Stories*, *The All-story Monthly* and *The Story Forest*, all appeared in the last decade of the late Qing. After the Revolution of 1911, the development of the newspaper industry was more rapid. "By 1921, there were 1104 newspapers and periodicals in China" (Chen, 1997). Newspapers and magazines with the aim of obtaining maximum economic benefit published plenty of detective novels. Moreover, a large number of publishers and translators received financial support from patrons, which further promoted the popularity of detective novels. The emergence of original-created detective novels around the Revolution of 1911 was also influenced by the popularity of translated detective novels and generous patrons. The great mass of translated detective novels made local literati contact with this new genre and became interested in it, and then tried to imitate translated detective novels. The existence of patrons provided economic assistance for the creation of literati and guaranteed the publication of original detective novels. In this case, the real sense of Chinese local detective novels gradually developed.

The above social factors accelerated the boom of translated detective novels in China, promoted the occurrence and development of original-created Chinese detective novels, and greatly enriched the diversity of Chinese literature.

3.2 *The Central Position of Translated Literature*

Ah Ying (1980) once said, "Translated books take over two-thirds of the total number of books". We can see that translation was more than creation at that time. As the mainstream of translated novels, translated detective novels also occupied a central position in the Chinese literary world at that time. According to Zohar, one of the following three cases is required for translated literature to occupy a central position in the polysystem of target language, and they are basically various manifestation of the same law. Firstly, when a polysystem has not yet been crystallized, that is to say, when a literature is "young" in the process of being established. Secondly, when a literature is either "peripheral" (within a large group of correlated literatures) or "weak," or both. Lastly, when there are turning points, crises, or literary vacuums in a literature (translated literature...). As a matter of fact, translated detective novels meets all the cases mentioned above, and that's the reason why it, as a foreign genre, had dominated Chinese literature at that time.

First of all, the upsurge of translated detective novels had reached its peak from 1907 to the period before the May 4th Movement, which coincided with the collapse of the traditional Chinese literary system and the establishment of a new literary system. After the Opium War in 1840, the western imperialists used cannons to attack the feudal system that had ruled China for more than two thousand years. Thanks to this brutal invasion, some advanced Chinese began to open their eyes to the world. They gradually learned about the blind arrogance of the Qing government, and also learned about the advanced and democratic western civilization. Therefore, they were eager to get enlightenment from western civilization, and began to take a difficult step to learn from the West, trying to save China in danger. In literature, most of the scholars with the consciousness of reform tried to overthrow the traditional literary system. They wanted to realize political reform and social reform by establishing a new literary system. In fact, The May 4th New Culture Movement, which broke out in 1919, was the watershed of the real establishment of China's new literary system. Chinese modern literature was "young" in the process of being established, and it met the first case.

Next, novel had long been in a peripheral and weak position in the polysystem of traditional Chinese literature, and the traditional Chinese novels had not been accepted by the mainstream literature for a long time. Scholars insisted that there are ten schools and only nine can be accepted (Ban, 1962). When the feudal princes presided over politics, the ten schools arose almost at the same. They stood side by side and insisted on their own theories to lobby the feudal princes, hoping to obtain the support. However, Ban excluded the novel and believed that only the remaining nine schools were available.

In the Chinese literary tradition, novels had always been disdained by scholars who read the Four Books and Five Classics, and were not accepted by the ruling class. Writing novel was regarded as trivial skills, which is not practiced by strong men. In the society ruled by the feudal monarch, all literature was in the service of politics and must be conducive to the rule of the feudal rulers. The rulers insisted on governing country with dignity and orthodoxy, so the novels with all kinds of fantastic colors and market elements were naturally not accepted by the ruling class. Secondly, the main audience of novel had a low social status. Be loved by many grass-root people, novels mainly originated from ancient myths, legends and fables, so its language and content were relatively simple. However, in ancient China, where the hierarchy was strict, the literary genre with the ordinary people as the main audience was bound to be in a marginal position. Even novel is a precious existence in the history of Chinese literature, but it had always been at the edge of the literature polysystem. It was precisely because of the weak position of traditional Chinese novels for a long time that it was inability to limit the spread and popularity of translated novels.

Thirdly, the traditional literature system was swayed, and the genre of novel was at a turning point. In 1898, reformists launched the Hundred Days Reform. They advocated learning from the West and carried out the bourgeois reform movement in politics, education, culture, agriculture, industry and commerce. In fact, it was a thorough upper-class movement that lacked a reliable social foundation and was seriously divorced from the broad masses, which was one of the reasons for the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform. After the reform, reformists gradually realized the importance of mobilizing the masses. About

how to enlighten and awaken the sleeping populace, they turned their eyes to the novel. In 1902, Liang put forward in *the Relationship between Novels and Mass Governance*, published in the first issue of *New Novel*, "Therefore, to improve mass governance today, it must begin with the revolution of the novel circle; If you want renew people, you must start with new novels" (Chen, 1997). Since then, the slogan of "Novel Revolution" rose in Chinese literature. Advanced intellectuals took the novel as a tool to educate the public. While vigorously attacking the traditional novel, they spared no effort to elevate the status of "new novel" in the polysystem of Chinese literature. In this revolution, the traditional literature polysystem centered on poet had been severely impacted, and Chinese literature was facing an important turning point. The genre of novel was also at a turning point in China. At the same time, detective novel was translated into Chinese literature as a foreign genre, which was a brand new form of literary creation. This genre was not in the polysystem of Chinese literature, and it was a vacuum zone of Chinese literature. The introduction of translated detective novels filled this vacuum zone. Gradually, this genre was widely spread and established in China, which enriched the polysystem of Chinese literature.

4. Conclusion

The popularity of translated detective novels from the 1890s to the 1930s was related to the fact that translated literature occupied the dominant position in the polysystem of literature, while the complex social environment at that time provided external factors for its continued development. By analyzing this phenomenon comprehensively with polysystem theory, we can have a deeper understanding of its essence.

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