

Original Paper

A Study of the Influence of Field, Habitus and Capital on Lin Shu's Translation from the Perspective of Bourdieu's Sociology

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Abstract

Lin Shu, a pivotal translator during the late-Qing “the eastward spread of Western learning”, produced translations that not only responded to the enlightenment needs of national salvation, but also opened up new possibilities for modern Chinese literary translation. Faced with the long-standing academic controversies surrounding his translations, this paper introduces the theoretical framework of “field, capital, habitus” by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, aiming to reinterpret Lin Shu’s translation practice from a sociological perspective. The study argues that Lin Shu’s translations are not merely isolated linguistic transfers, but the result of the dynamic interplay among his personal capital, habitus and the external social structure within the specific historical field of the late Qing Dynasty. By investigating the historical context of national salvation, the cultural demands of contemporary readers, as well as Lin Shu’s profound classical Chinese literacy and scholar-official identity, this paper systematically explores how field, capital and habitus collectively governed his selection of source texts, target language and translation strategies, thereby uncovering the underlying socio-historical logic of his translational activities.

Keywords

Lin Shu, Bourdieu, sociology of translation, field, capital, habitus

1. Introduction

The late Qing Dynasty was a crucial transitional period in the history of Chinese translation. The wave of “the eastward spread of Western learning” made translation a core vehicle of cross-cultural communication giving rise to a group of highly influential translators, among whom Lin Shu (1852-1924) was a particularly distinctive genius in the translation field. This traditional scholar with no knowledge of foreign languages, relying on his profound proficiency in classical Chinese, translated more than 180 Western literary works, including *La Dame aux Camélias* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* through collaboration

with oral interpreters. Lin Shu's translations, with their elegant and vivid classical Chinese style, reconstruction of traditional Chinese ethics, and strong sense of national salvation, laid the foundation for the transformation of modern Chinese literature. However, Lin Shu's unique translation method—free translation and adaptation under the “oral interpretation and written translation” model—has also triggered enduring controversies about translation “fidelity”, making him a valuable yet contradictory typical case in translation studies.

Bourdieu's sociological theory is “the earliest emerging and most widely applied theoretical framework” in the field of translation sociology (Xu Minhui, 2022, p. 29). Its core concepts include field, habitus and capital, which provide an important analytical tool for interpreting the interactive relationship between translation practice and social structure. In the translation field of the late Qing Dynasty, the political field, literary field and power field interacted with each other. As an agent, Lin Shu's profound proficiency in classical Chinese constituted his core cultural capital, his cooperation with oral interpreters such as Wei Yi formed his important social capital, and these capitals were successfully transformed into symbolic capital of reputation and influence through the dissemination of his translations. Meanwhile, as a scholar-official nurtured by traditional Confucianism, his literary concept of “literature as a vehicle of ideas (wen yi zai dao)” and persistence in the aesthetics of classical Chinese constituted his stable and unique translator habitus, which profoundly influenced his selection of texts, adaptation of contents and use of language. Placing Lin Shu's translation practice within this theoretical framework helps to go beyond the simple judgment of “fidelity” and understand the complex social and personal logic behind his behaviors.

Based on this, the study situates Lin Shu's translation practice within Bourdieu's sociological framework of “field-capital-habitus” to reinterpret his translational behaviours from a sociological perspective. Adopting three analytical dimensions of source-text selection, target-language choice and translation-strategy adoption, and drawing on representative translated works such as *La Dame aux Camélias*, this paper explores how field, capital and habitus jointly shape Lin Shu's translation practice. By deploying Bourdieu's sociological analytical framework, the present study seeks to move beyond the long-standing simplistic binary judgment of faithfulness versus unfaithfulness in translations, thereby uncovering the intertwined socio-historical logic and translator-centred individual logic behind Lin Shu's translational choices.

2. Literature Review

Academic research on Lin Shu's translation has formed diverse strands. Traditional research mostly focuses on the texts themselves and their literary historical value. At the level of text and translation theory, discussions have centered on his translation methods such as “free translation”, “conveying the gist” and even “mistranslation”. Among them, Qian Zhongshu's classic analysis in *Lin Shu's Translations* is the most representative one, pointing out that although Lin's translations are “full of mistranslations”, they are “still charming” (Qian Zhongshu, 1985, p. 2). At the level of literary historical status, studies

have explored the position of Lin's translated novels in the modern transformation of Chinese literature and their influence on generations of writers such as Lu Xun and Qian Zhongshu. In recent years, some studies have begun to introduce a sociological perspective. Li Jiuying (2019) took translation sociology as the framework to discuss the relationship between the pseudo-translation phenomenon in Lin Shu's translation and the social and historical environment of the late Qing Dynasty. There are also studies that juxtapose Lin Shu with Yan Fu, analyzing the positioning and practical differences of the two in the modern translation field from the perspective of translator capital and habitus (Shao Lu, 2012, p. 77).

As the most widely applied theoretical framework in the field of translation sociology, Bourdieu's sociological theory has been gradually introduced into translation studies since the 1990s. Western academia has formed a research camp represented by Jean-Marc Gouanvic, who used the concepts of field and habitus to analyze the power structure of the translation field and the practical logic of translators, proposing that the core goal of participants in the translation field is "pursuing the maximum degree of symbolic capital" (Xu Minhui, 2022, p. 29). Domestic research started in the early 21st century. Wang Hongtao (2011) pointed out that Bourdieu's theory and Luhmann's social system theory are the core theoretical resources for translation sociology research. Wang Baorong (2024), when sorting out domestic translation research from a sociological perspective in the past 20 years, found that Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital have been widely used to interpret translation phenomena in different historical periods, including research on the translation of Chinese classics such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and the adaptability of this theory in translation research has been generally confirmed. Overall, most of the existing research on Lin Shu's translation remains at the level of micro-text comparison or single-dimensional impact analysis. Although Bourdieu's theory has been widely applied in translation sociology research, studies applying it to Lin Shu's special case of achieving a legendary status in translation without understanding foreign languages are still relatively scarce, failing to fully explore the fit between the theory and Lin Shu's unique translation practice. There is still great room for expansion in relevant interdisciplinary research.

3. Bourdieu's Sociology of Translation

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) was a famous French sociologist and philosopher. He proposed many core concepts such as field, habitus, capital, cultural reproduction and social conditioning, and summarized a sociological formula: $[(\text{Habitus}) (\text{Capital})] + \text{Field} = \text{Practice}$ (Bourdieu, 1984, p.101). This paper takes the three core concepts of "field", "habitus" and "capital" in Bourdieu's sociological theory as the main analytical tools. Therefore, it is necessary to elaborate on these three concepts.

3.1 Field: The Social Space of Translation Activities

According to Bourdieu, field is "a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). In his view, the social world is not a homogeneous whole, but a scattered structure composed of multiple relatively autonomous small social worlds. These small worlds—whether literary, academic or translational—follow their own unique logic and operational rules,

forming relatively independent but interrelated “fields”. In the translation field, various agents such as authors, translators, readers, publishers and critics constitute a complex relational network, and the interaction and competition between them shape the specific form of translation practice (Munday, 2016, p. 237). The core feature of the field lies in its power struggle: participants compete by virtue of their respective capital (including cultural, social, economic capital, etc.) to gain and maintain a favorable position in the field.

3.2 Capital: The Social Resources for Translators' Competition

The concept of “capital” in Bourdieu’s sociological theory goes beyond the scope of economics. He constructed the concept in the sense of metaphor: “accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its ‘incorporated,’ embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor” (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 46), and is the basic resource for agents to participate in field struggles and strive for positions and power. In addition to economic capital, Bourdieu particularly emphasized the importance of cultural capital and social capital. Cultural capital is embodied in the knowledge, skills and aesthetic taste acquired by individuals through education and socialization. It can be embodied (such as personal academic accomplishment) or objectified (such as owned books, works of art, etc.). Social capital is based on relational networks and membership, and it gains value through the expansion and maintenance of social relations. In translation practice, the language ability, cultural knowledge, network resources and even industry reputation mastered by translators are important capitals for them to compete in the translation field.

3.3 Habitus: The Internal Tendency of Translators' Behaviors

Habitus is one of the core concepts in Bourdieu’s theoretical system. It refers to “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). Habitus can be understood as the “internalization of social structures”, a system of durable and transposable dispositions formed by individuals through long-term socialization in specific social positions. These tendencies are not only the precipitation of personal history, but also reflect the imprint of social structures. In translation practice, a translator’s habitus affects his selection of source texts, preference for translation strategies and aesthetic judgment of target texts. Bourdieu observed that habitus, as a generative structure, is more than mere habitual reaction; it represents creative adaptation formed within concrete situations (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 126). And he emphasized that practice is the result of the interaction of field, capital and habitus, and there is a dialectical relationship between the three: habitus, as a product of the history of the field, also functions as a condition for the reproduction of the field structure.

4. The Influence of Field, Habitus and Capital on Lin Shu's Translation

Bourdieu's formula "[(Habitus) (Capital)] + Field = Practice" provides an integrated sociological analytical framework for interpreting translator's behaviors. Lin Shu's translation practice was not an isolated linguistic activity, but a product of the dynamic interaction between habitus, capital, and the specific field of the late Qing Dynasty. Taking this as the core logic, this chapter will conduct a specific analysis from the three core aspects of translation practice—selection of source texts, choice of target language, and selection of translation strategies.

4.1 Influence on the Selection of Source Texts

The selection of source texts is the starting point of translation practice. The more than 180 Western works translated by Lin Shu in his life are by no means randomly selected, but strategic choices based on his own capital stock and habitus characteristics to actively adapt to field needs and accumulate capital in the literary and social field of the late Qing Dynasty. The field is a space full of struggles. The unique attributes of the translation field in the late Qing Dynasty, Lin Shu's capital structure and scholar-official habitus have jointly shaped the core logic of his text selection.

The core field contradiction in the late Qing society was the collision and interweaving of the traditional scholar-official cultural field and the emerging modern enlightenment field. After the failures of the Opium War and the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, the national crisis became increasingly serious, and "Enlightening people's wisdom and saving the nation from subjugation (kai min zhi, jiu wang guo)" became the mainstream demand of the whole society. The Reformists regarded translation as a key tool for spreading advanced Western ideas, forming a strong demand for enlightenment translation. At the same time, the development of the commodity economy gave birth to the rising urban civilian class, whose surging demand for popular literature with intricate plots and abundant emotions provided a broad market for translated works (Zhu Yu, 2008, p. 73). The translation field during this period was not independently existing, but deeply embedded in the social and cultural field, closely related to the political field and literary field. The cultural control of the Qing government defined the boundaries of translation, and the literary concept of "literature as a vehicle of ideas" in the traditional literary field influenced the value orientation of translation. These field rules jointly constituted the external environment for Lin Shu's text selection.

Lin Shu's capital stock is the core driving force for his text selection. As a translator from a traditional scholar-official background, his core capital is cultural capital and social capital. In terms of cultural capital, he had profound proficiency in classical Chinese and solid Confucian cultural literacy, which made him more adept at and inclined to handle literary texts with strong narrativity and clear ethical orientation, rather than esoteric Western academic works or obscure theoretical documents. In terms of social capital, he established stable cooperative relations with translators proficient in foreign languages such as Wei Yi and Wang Shouchang, and had close contacts with Reformists, which enabled him to accurately capture the text needs of the enlightenment field. To accumulate social reputation capital and enlightenment capital, Lin Shu chose works reflecting national liberation and social equality such as

Uncle Tom's Cabin, which echoed the Reformists' appeal of "saving the nation from subjugation and ensuring its survival (jiu wang tu cun)". At that time, the wave of anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States was becoming increasingly fierce, and Chinese people in the United States suffered inhumane treatment. Lin Shu hoped to alert the Chinese people through the tragic fate of black slaves and avoid China repeating the same mistake (Wei Wei, 2024, p. 74). The selection of popular romantic novels such as *La Dame aux Camélias* reflected his strategy of acquiring economic capital: such works had fascinating plots and a wide audience, which could bring substantial royalty income, make up for the shortage of his economic capital, and expand his influence through the dissemination of the works. Bourdieu emphasized that capital is convertible. Lin Shu's selection of texts of different themes is essentially a process of capital conversion through text matching—converting cultural capital into social capital and economic capital, and then further expanding translation resources through social capital.

Lin Shu's traditional scholar-official habitus exerted an implicit but crucial restrictive influence on the selection of source texts. Lin Shu received traditional imperial examination education since childhood and was nurtured in the Confucian cultural atmosphere, forming the literary concept of "literature as a vehicle of ideas" and the traditional ethical values of "loyalty, righteousness, filial piety and fraternity (zhong yi xiao ti)". This habitus made him unconsciously follow the traditional ethical norms in text selection. Even when translating Western works, he tended to choose texts that conformed to traditional ethical views and had clear moral orientations: the loyalty and self-sacrifice of Marguerite in *La Dame aux Camélias* were in line with the moral model of traditional women; the resistance spirit of black slaves in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could echo the Confucian "distinction between righteousness and profit (yi li zhi bian)". In addition, Lin Shu agreed with Liang Qichao's view that "novels are the soul of the nation", and firmly believed that "to open the wisdom of Chinese people, the way is to translate more novels related to political thoughts first" (Zhu Yu, 2008, p. 75). This concept also made his text selection always focus on the core of enlightenment and education.

4.2 Influence on the Selection of Target Language

Lin Shu's firm choice of classical Chinese as the target language in his translation practice is an inevitable result of the joint action of the language power structure in the late Qing field, his own capital advantages and habitus characteristics. This choice not only conformed to the social and cultural context of the time, but also maximized his own advantages, becoming a key factor for the wide dissemination of his translated works.

The language power structure in the late Qing field determined the rationality and necessity of classical Chinese as the target language. At that time, classical Chinese was still the mainstream written language of the official and elite classes, carrying orthodox cultural authority, while vernacular Chinese was still in its infancy, only used sporadically in folk oral language and some popular readings, and had not formed a broad reader acceptance base. The core audience of the translation field—the scholar-official class, Reformist intellectuals and some enlightened citizens—had long been nurtured in traditional education and had a natural acceptance inertia and aesthetic identification with classical Chinese. This language

power structure directly restricted the selection of the target language: if vernacular Chinese was adopted, it would not only be difficult to gain the recognition of the elite class, but also might be regarded as “unorthodox” and rejected; while classical Chinese, as the carrier of “cultural orthodoxy”, could endow the translated text with a higher cultural status, conforming to the mainstream value orientation of the field.

Choosing classical Chinese as the target language is the maximization of Lin Shu’s core capital advantages. As a traditional scholar-official, one of Lin Shu’s core capitals was his profound proficiency in classical Chinese, and his level of classical Chinese creation was widely praised at that time. For Lin Shu, who did not understand foreign languages and relied on the oral interpretation of collaborators, the conciseness and expressiveness of classical Chinese could just make up for the information loss in oral interpretation. Although collaborators such as Wang Shouchang and Wei Yi were proficient in foreign languages, their classical Chinese skills were far inferior to Lin Shu’s. It was precisely Lin Shu’s proficiency in classical Chinese that integrated scattered oral content into a logically coherent and elegantly written text, making translated works such as *La Dame aux Camélias* create a sensation (Chen Guoxing, 2009, p. 76). This choice not only consolidated his cultural capital, but also accumulated rich social reputation capital through the wide dissemination of his works, making him a core figure in the late Qing translation field.

Lin Shu’s choice of classical Chinese is also a natural expression and firm adherence to his scholar-official habitus. Lin Shu received traditional imperial examination education since childhood and had long engaged in literary creation in classical Chinese, forming a stable habitus of using classical Chinese as the expression medium. He once said bluntly, “Recently, the French have also gradually hated classical Chinese and used colloquial language... The works of ancient people will fade from now on”, deeply worrying about the decline of classical Chinese, which shows his cherishing of classical Chinese. This habitus made him unconsciously use classical Chinese sentence patterns, allusions and expression techniques in translation. Lin Shu was not stubbornly opposed to all new changes, but in the scene of translation as cultural communication, choosing classical Chinese was not only a natural drive of habitus, but also an adherence to his own cultural identity—he still shouted “There is no reason for classical Chinese to perish” on his deathbed (Chen Guoxing, 2009, p. 77). This persistence in classical Chinese is essentially a specific embodiment of his scholar-official habitus in cultural communication.

4.3 Influence on the Selection of Translation Strategies

Lin Shu’s translation strategy is characterized by “domestication as the mainstay and foreignization as the supplement”, which is specifically reflected in his addition, deletion, adaptation, localization interpretation and other aspects of the original text. These strategic choices are not arbitrary, but adaptive adjustments made by him in the specific cultural translation field of the late Qing Dynasty to balance the contradictions between fidelity to the original text and reader acceptance, capital accumulation and habitus restriction, which centrally reflect the complex interaction between field, capital and habitus.

The needs of the field dominated Lin Shu's translation strategy with domestication as the mainstay. The translation field in the late Qing Dynasty had strong utilitarianism and enlightenment, and its core appeal was to enable readers to understand Western culture to achieve enlightenment. Therefore, Lin Shu's primary goal in translation was to ensure that his translated works could be understood and welcomed by the scholar-official class and urban civilian readers at that time. This directly prompted him to widely adopt the domestication strategy: he localized Western names and place names, such as simplifying the heroine "Marguerite Gautier" in *La Dame aux Camélias* to "Cha Hua Nü" (the Lady of the Camellias) with Chinese classical imagery; he often transformed Western cultural allusions into images familiar to Chinese readers in the translated text, and even imitated the narrative structure of traditional Chinese chapter novels, adding formulaic expressions such as "It is said that (hua shuo)" and "Let's listen to the next chapter for details (qie ting xia hui fen jie)" to cater to readers' reading habits. This active adaptation to the acceptance habitus of local readers reflects Lin Shu's positive response to the rules of the translation field in the late Qing Dynasty.

Lin Shu's own scholar-official habitus profoundly restricted and shaped his adaptation and addition/deletion behaviors. Lin Shu's profound classical Chinese accomplishment and scholar-official habitus made it inevitable for him to adjust the original text in line with local ethics and mainstream values. For example, when translating *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Lin Shu significantly adapted and deleted the strong Christian salvation thought in the original text. The original text explicitly advocated that "In fact, if not exactly a believer in the doctrine of the efficiency of the extra good works of saints, he really seemed somehow or other to fancy that his wife had piety and benevolence enough for two—to indulge a shadowy expectation of getting into heaven through her superabundance of qualities to which he made no particular pretension.", while Lin Shu's translated text only summarized it as "thinking that if I am not virtuous, if my wife is virtuous for me, that is also my kindness" (Xiong Jianmin, 2013, p. 37), transforming religious doctrine into an ethical discourse in line with the Confucian concept of "cultivating oneself and governing the family (xiu shen qi jia)". This kind of addition, deletion and adaptation is the localization reconstruction of Western texts by Lin Shu as a cultural intermediary, aiming to make his translated works not only convey new knowledge, but also not break through the boundary of the mainstream values of the field, thus effectively accumulating his personal cultural capital and symbolic capital.

5. Conclusion

Translation is never a linguistic game played in a vacuum, but rather an epitome of struggles among diverse forces within social structures. Drawing on Bourdieu's sociological analytical framework of "field-capital-habitus", this paper moves beyond the traditional binary evaluation centred on translation faithfulness, situates Lin Shu within the late-Qing translation field, and investigates how external social structures and individual translator-related factors jointly shape his translational choices. Guided by Bourdieu's practical formula "[Habitus] (Capital)] + Field = Practice", this paper conducts concrete

analyses from three core dimensions: source-text selection, target-language choice, and translation-strategy adoption. In terms of source-text selection, Lin Shu's choice of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *La Dame aux Camélias* responded to the late-Qing call for national salvation and enlightenment, was driven by the scholar-official habitus of "literature as a vehicle of ideas", and enabled conversions among different forms of capital. His adoption of classical Chinese as the target language stemmed from objective constraints imposed by the linguistic power structure of late-Qing China, represented full deployment of his cultural capital embodied in classical Chinese competence, and reflected his identity as a scholar-official. As for his domestication-oriented strategies of addition, deletion and rewriting, they accommodated the reading conventions of local readers on the one hand, and realized the localized reconstruction of Western texts through his personal habitus on the other. Such strategies balanced the dissemination of new knowledge against mainstream values and facilitated the accumulation of symbolic capital. Lin Shu's array of translational decisions is consequently the outcome of the interplay among the external field, capital endowments and the translator's habitus.

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