

Original Paper

A Study on Wang Fengzhen's Chinese Translation of *The Good Earth* in the Perspective of Cultural Turn

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Abstract

The Good Earth, a novel by the modern American author Pearl S. Buck, takes rural life in China as its main theme, and vividly reproduces the “vernacular China” of the early 20th century in terms of folk customs, the image of peasants, and the concept of the land, etc. Pearl S. Buck's writing gesture of truly understanding a foreign country and putting it into words constructed a new image of China, eliminated the prejudice of the Western world against China at that time, and had important practical significance for the friendly exchanges between the East and the West. From the end of the 1980s, with the occurrence of “cultural turn”, cultural studies gradually penetrated into the field of translation. The focus of translation research has also shifted from language to culture. As a special transnational literature, Pearl S. Buck's work has high research value in the cultural field. Therefore, this paper will explore the characteristics and strategies of Wang Fengzhen's Chinese translation of “*The Good Earth*” and the translator's view of translation from the perspective of the cultural turn, with the help of textual close reading and textual analysis. In addition, as Pearl S. Buck's works have an important influence overseas, this study also strengthens understanding of the China's image construction and the power relationship between China and the West at that time, to further improve the dissemination of traditional Chinese culture overseas.

Keywords

cultural turn, cultural translation, The Good Earth, Pearl S. Buck, Wang Fengzhen's Chinese translation of The Good Earth

1. Introduction

Born in the United States, Pearl S. Buck was brought to live in Zhenjiang, China at the age of three months by her missionary parents, and later moved to Suzhou, Nanjing and Lushan. Living and working in China for nearly 40 years allowed her to see the cultural soil of China, which is different

from that of the Western tradition, and to develop a deep affection for the Chinese land. In her works, there is real Chinese culture and real Chinese people. Her novel *The Good Earth* mainly depicts the life of peasants at the beginning of the 20th century and vividly portrays the folk customs, the image of peasants, and the social system of China at that time. This paper will focus on the translation phenomenon in Wang Fengzhen's Chinese translation of *The Good Earth* from the perspective of the cultural turn, and make some definitions and analyses, so as to better understand the Chinese and Western discourse systems in literary works, which is also of certain practical significance and value to the Chinese and Western cultural exchanges.

2. A Brief Overview of the Cultural Turn

2.1 Historical Background of the Cultural Turn

André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett, in their edited volume *Translation, History and Culture*, formally proposed a “cultural turn” in translation studies—a shift from linguistic issues to a greater focus on extra-textual factors. The study of translation practice should not only discuss the issue of “equivalence”, but also pay attention to the influence of ideology, social system, norms and other factors on translation in different historical periods. In this regard, they redefined translation in their book, “The object of study has been redefined; what is studied is text embedded within its network of both source and target. (Bassnette, 1990, p. 12)” The transformation of anything cannot be achieved overnight, there must be a process of preparation. In 1972, the Dutch translation theorist James Holmes published *The Name and Nature of Translation Studies*, which is considered to be a symbol of the establishment of the school of translation studies, namely, the cultural school. The term “Translation Studies” was widely used to describe the process of translation. However, in the following thirty years, a large number of translation theorists and theories began to emerge, and the efforts of these scholars of translation studies also contributed to the emergence of the cultural turn, such as Katharina Reiss's text type theory, Hans Vermeer's the skopos theory, Even Zohar's polysystems theory, as well as feminist and postcolonial schools, among others. Actually, the cultural turn was a massive intellectual phenomenon, and it was not only happening in translation studies, but also in other fields such as linguistics, literature, history, area studies, etc.

Zohar's polysystems theory is one of the most important theories in the background of translation studies, which has obvious cultural qualities and makes an pivotal pavement for the cultural turn. He believes that any literary system should include translated literature, and innovation and changes are often initiated by translation. Besides, he points out in his article *The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem* that translation plays an important role in the formation of national culture. And since the polysystem is part of a larger cultural system, it is natural to explore literary translation as one of the components of literary polysystem, taking into account the cultural factors (Li, 2018, p. 11). He also emphasizes that the historical situation determines the number and kinds of translations, and the status of translated texts will change according to the position of receiving culture.

It can be seen that Zohar pays considerable attention to the cultural factors in his interpretation of the polysystems theory, and brings cultural orientation to the field of translation, which is forward-looking and contributes to the cultural turn to a certain extent. Another example of the cultural turn in translation area is the research into norms. Gideon Toury, Andrew Chesterman and Theo Hermans tried to explore translational norms in terms of conventions and culture. In this regard, Toury emphasizes the cultural qualities of norms in translation studies, and he believes that the culture of the target language determines the functions, forms and strategies of translation, as well as the role played by translators in the society. Translation studies in postcolonial theory are also closely related to historical and literary studies, in which the unequal power relationships in the process of text translation play a great role.

In conclusion, Translation practice and activities are influenced and restricted by various factors, such as political awareness, the needs of the times, cultural background and audience psychology, etc. It must adapt to the requirements of different cultures and the needs of different groups in different cultures. However, the cultural turn will not replace the translation research of linguistic school, for it is the enrichment and deepening of the traditional view of translation.

2.2 *The Representatives of the Cultural Turn*

In the 1990s, scholars of translation studies, such as Susan Bassnett, André Levefere, Lawrence Venuti, etc., clearly put forward the view of cultural translation. The series of related issues raised by them contributed to the general awakening of cultural awareness in translation studies, and at the same time opened up the dimension and scope of translation studies, giving translation studies historical and cultural factors in addition to language.

Susan Bassnett, a famous comparative literature scholar, translation theorist, and literary critic, as a leading figure of the “cultural turn” in translation theory, published her book *Translation Studies* in response to Holmes’s famous article *The Name and Nature of Translation*, in which she argued that the process of translation is a process of transcoding cultural concepts between the source text and the translated text. Translation is, in essence, a kind of cross-cultural communication, a way of mutual understanding and communication between different civilizations and cultures. In her book *Translation, History and Culture: A Source Book* (1992), co-edited with André Levefere, they put forward the idea of cultural translation, which is not only a process of transcoding linguistic symbols, but also a process of cultural transcoding between texts. Moreover, in *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (1993), she mentioned that comparative literature as a discipline was outdated, and that translation should now be regarded as a dominant discipline, and comparative literature was only a subordinate field of study. These ideas caused a lot of discussions at that time, but it is undeniable that they consolidated the status of the translation discipline. Later, Bassnett and Levefere compiled a collection of essays, *Constructing Cultures: Essay on Literary Translation*, which discussed the latest developments in translation studies, cultural studies, and the teaching of translation, and pointed out the direction of the discipline of translation in the next century. They see future areas of research as including the history of translation, postcolonial translation, different kinds of criticism, anthologies,

reference works, and translation itself.

André Levefere, one of the representatives of the Manipulation School, together with Bassnett, put forward the cultural dimension of translation and further promoted the cultural turn of translation. In his book *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, he discussed several factors affecting the study of translation: power, ideology, patronage and poetics, and calls translation, editing, the compilation of anthologies, literary histories, and reference books “rewriting”. Translation reflects the dynamic relationship between source and target language culture, and is also the rewriting of one culture by another. These theories reflect the originality of Levefere’s thinking and greatly expand the breadth and depth of translation scholarship. It also allows him to lay an important foundation for the theory of the cultural school of translation.

In *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995), Venuti focuses on both domesticating and foreignizing as two ways of translation, and he proposes that the translator should be allowed to appear and be visible in the translated work, so that the translator’s role can be manifested. He advocates the adoption of foreignizing in translation to faithfully reflect the linguistic and cultural differences of the original text, so as to show cultural diversity. In this way, the reproduction of foreign texts in the local context introduces new cultural concepts and brings about influence and change to the local culture. In a word, Venuti’s translation theory expands the space of translation research and enriches the theoretical foundation of the cultural school.

3. Analysis of Wang Fengzhen’s Chinese Translation of *The Good Earth*

3.1 The Visibility of Translator

Translator is the main body of translation practice and one of the most important factors affecting translation. In the traditional view of translation, “equivalence” and “faithfulness” are the basic criteria for measuring translation, and many other factors are often neglected. Translators are often not able to express their own ideas, and should reproduce the original text in the target language completely objectively. This requires translators to give up their personalities, styles, subjective colors, and personal opinions, etc., leaving no traces of translation in the text, and absolutely reproducing the spirit of the original work, so that the general readers do not feel the existence of the translator. With the occurrence of cultural turn in translation, scholars gradually shift their focus of research from the original text to the target language text, and the main object of research also shifts from language to culture. Under such circumstances, the role of the translator in the translation process has also begun to be emphasized by the academic community. In addition, as the subjectivity of the translator is constantly emphasized and valued, the trend of deconstructionism also provides an opportunity for this. Translation theorists reflect on traditional translation research with deconstructionism as the core idea, and the field of translation theory research has been expanded from the general linguistic and textual level to the cultural, historical and philosophical levels. Venuti once said, “The purpose of writing *The Translator’s Invisibility* is to go against the tradition—to make the translator visible in the translation...

(Guo, 2000, p. 50)”

The translator’s visibility and invisibility can only be expressed through the translated text. Since *The Good Earth* is a special Chinese-themed foreign literature, the translator will add his subjective cognition and feelings, subconsciously evaluate, criticize and process the text accordingly. Therefore, the resulting text will, in any case, embody some kind of subjectivity of the translator. In this paper, a comparative study of the English and Chinese versions of *The Good Earth* will show how Wang Fengzhen utilizes his translator’s subjectivity and creativity in the process of translating.

Because of the great differences between China and the United States in terms of cultural, social psychology, institutions, etc., the use of language in the process of translation will be largely constrained by the social context. For example, in Wang’s translation, social etiquette and norms will be appropriately rewritten to conform to the cultural context of the target language. For example,

“Well, and Elder Brother and his son and his sons and my sister-in-law. (Buck, 2012, p. 166)”

王译：“喂，大哥，侄子，侄孙，还有侄媳妇！（赛珍珠，2010，p. 112）”

“It is only play and is she not my sister? Can a man do any evil with his sister? (Buck, 2012, p. 236)”

王译：“我是闹着玩的。能跟侄女胡来吗？（赛珍珠，2010，p. 165）”

The example above is that the uncle of Wang Lung greets Wang Lung’s family. It is clearly inappropriate to translate “sons”, “sister-in-law” and “sister” directly and literally as “儿子们”, “嫂子/弟媳”和“姐妹”. Therefore, Wang Fengzhen rewrites them as “侄孙”, “侄媳妇” “侄女”, according to the specific relationships of the characters in the text, as well as the traditional Chinese norms of address. This is not confined to the original form, but fits well with the Chinese cultural background embodied in the context, effectively conveying the intent of the original text.

Besides, unlike the West, Chinese people have always held a conservative attitude towards sex. Therefore, translators are bound to be culturally influenced by the background of the times and adopt different strategies when translating. For example,

“When O-lan had come to his house it was health to his flesh and he lusted for her robustly as a beast for its mate and he took her and was satisfied...(Buck, 2012, p. 161)”

王译：“当阿兰到他家时，他旺盛的性欲被她激起，他像一个动物寻找配偶一样对她充满欲望，他得到她后感到满足了.....(赛珍珠，2010，p. 150)”

Unlike many Chinese translators who tend to change the sexual content of Western books, Wang Fengzhen obviously does not shy away from sexual depictions in his translations. This is because Wang Fengzhen’s translations were written in the 1970s and 1980s, when sexual awareness was more open than in the past, so he gave full play to his autonomy in translating the books to fully show the depiction of sex in the text. In other translations of *The Good Earth*, especially those before Wang’s translation, such as Hu Zhongchi’s and Zhiwu’s translations, sexual descriptions are often omitted and rewritten, which is also closely related to the background of the era in which the translator was working.

It can be seen that the translator, under the influence of the cultural background, will take the initiative

to carry out the translation practice creatively, so as to change some linguistic expressions of the original text, which means he accurately grasp some cultural factors and translate them appropriately. Wang Fengzhen gives great respect and understanding to the original text, and on the basis of this, he vividly restores the color of the local Chinese culture in the text, thus creating this excellent translation.

3.2 *The Creative Treason*

The concept of “creative treason” was originally proposed by the French scholar Robert Escarpit in his book *Sociology of literature*, in which he argues that translation is a form of creative treason that gives a new look to the original work and enables it to communicate with a wide range of readers in literature (Xiao, 2015, p. 148). Xie Tianzhen then made further elaboration and supplementation in his *Medio-translatology* and *New Perspectives in Translation Studies*, in which he expressed that creativity in literary translation is a subjective effort of the translator to approach and reproduce the original text with his own artistic creative talent, while creative treason in literary translation is a reflection of the objective deviation from the original text caused by the translator in order to achieve a certain subjective desire. Afterwards, he introduced this viewpoint into the Chinese comparative literature and translation community, which aroused the discussion of many scholars, and the response was enthusiastic.

Generally speaking, translators will try their best to be faithful to the original text when translating, but in reality, due to the great differences in language structure, such faithfulness is often difficult to achieve, which also shows that there must be the objective reality of “creative treason” in the translated text. This point of view also makes scholars focus on the status, dissemination, influence and significance of the translated text in the context of the target language, paying more attention to the essence of translation and affirming the value of translators’ practice. It is obvious that it’s not enough for translation research to focus only on the language level, but also on the communication between different cultures, so as to reconsider the essence of translation.

Due to the great differences between Chinese and Western languages and cultures, the Chinese translation of *The Good Earth* is not completely faithful to the original text, and there are examples of creative treason. Under appropriate circumstances, the translator will flexibly process the original text according to the needs and carry out creative treason, so that the translation will be more faithful to the original text and also satisfy the needs of the target readers. This process is also subject to the constraints and influences of internal factors as well as external factors such as social ideology, historical environment, poetics, and patronage. The following is a list of examples from the Chinese translation of *The Good Earth* to analyze how creative treason is reflected in the text and the factors that influence it. Example:

“but he liked best to have one stir up meal in hot water and sup it as his father had done. (Buck, 2012, p. 297)”

王译：“然而，他最喜欢的却是玉米面粥。他吃起玉米面粥来就像他父亲当年那样。(赛珍珠, 2010, p. 271)”

Here Wang Fengzhen did not translate “stir up meal in hot water” as “开水泡饭” but as “玉米面粥”, which on the surface seems to be unfaithful to the original text, but in fact is more in line with the context and readers’ expectations. Because at that time, poor peasants could not afford to eat rice, and “玉米面粥” was a common food for them. This also shows that Wang Fengzhen intentionally mistranslated the original text, and by transforming the original text, he made the translation more in line with the customs of the target culture.

Also, since the religious cultures of China and the West also have great differences, Wang Fengzhen will also flexibly deal with the relevant religious content when translating, and carry out conscious creative treason to cater to the religious beliefs and the ideology of the target culture. For example:

“These were the god himself and his lady. (Buck, 2012, p. 36)”

王译：“两尊神像是土地爷本人和土地婆。(赛珍珠, 2010, p. 18)”

Most Westerners believe in Christianity, and “god” refers to “上帝” 或 “神”, which is obviously inappropriate if used directly. Since the Chinese are familiar with Taoist and Buddhist culture, the Chinese gods are more often called “老天爷”, “菩萨” and so on. Moreover, most of the people in the countryside at that time lived on the land and believed in the God of the Land to pray for good weather and good harvests, so Wang Fengzhen translated it as “土地公”.

In addition to the differences in religious vocabulary, the translation of other words also demonstrates a certain creative treason. For example:

“...even if the merchant Liu says it is a year too evil for wedding we must send her, lest we cannot keep her virgin with this hot tiger in the house. (Buck, 2012, p. 236)”

王译：“即使刘先生说年景不好，不能结婚，我们也要把她送过去。家里有这么一条色狼，等她失去贞洁就不好办了。(赛珍珠, 2010, p. 212)”

Here, the son of Wang Lung’s uncle was lusting after Wang Lung’s second daughter, and Wang Lung’s eldest son saw it and said this. Pearl S. Buck used “hot tiger” to describe the greed and lust of Wang Lung’s uncle’s son. However, if it is directly translated as “热吼吼的老虎”, Chinese readers will be puzzled because the image of tiger in Chinese culture is more fierce and cruel, and it does not convey the meaning of greed and lust. Thus Wang Fengzhen translates it as “色狼”, which is very suitable for the Chinese cultural context. This creative translation is very faithful to the original text and conveys the author’s intention.

In conclusion, creative treason is inevitable in the process of literary translation. Instead of being overly faithful to the original text, which thus cannot be conveyed appropriately by the translator, it is better to let the translator give full play to his subjective initiative and effectively carry out creative treason to achieve a better translation effect.

3.3 Domestication and Foreignization

After the cultural turn of translation, how to deal with the relationship between the source and the target culture has become a key concern, and new thoughts may be given to the choice of translation strategies. The famous American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti thought about the above

problems and reinterpreted the translation theory of domesticating and foreignizing. In 1831, the German philosopher Schleiermacher put forward that there are two kinds of orientations in translation: alienating and naturalizing. Venuti extends and reflects on this further. Western translators have long neglected the strategy of alienating, and this neglect of foreign cultures is clearly unjustified. Venuti believes that the naturalization strategy creates a transparent and fluent style by deleting or assimilating linguistic features and cultural connotations of foreign texts; while transparency of the translated text makes the translator's subjectivity obscured and makes the translator "invisible" in the translated text (L, 2018, p. 19). In general, there is no opposition between domesticating and foreignizing strategies in translation, and they need to be used effectively, and foreignization should not be neglected to enrich the language and culture of the target language.

The cultural background of *The Good Earth* is set in the rural areas of northern Anhui Province in the early 20th century, so there is a great deal of content about the local customs in the text. Wang Fengzhen's translation will be analyzed in terms of his use of domesticating and foreignizing strategies in translating these cultural factors. Chinese New Year is an important traditional festival in China, for which Wang mostly uses domestication in his translation, and it fits well with the cultural background of the target language and the reading habits of the readers. For example:

"Wang Lung went into the town to the candlemaker's shop and he bought squares of red paper on which were brushed in gilt ink the letter for happiness and some with the letter for riches...(Buck, 2012, p. 56)"

王译:"王龙到城里的蜡烛店买了一些红纸方, 其中有些印着金色的福字, 另外一些印着富字...(赛珍珠, 2010, p. 35)"

"And then upon the doors of his house he pasted long strips of red paper brushed with mottoes of good luck...(Buck, 2012, p. 56)"

王译:"然后他在家门口贴上了红纸对联, 上面写了些吉利的字眼...(赛珍珠, 2010, p. 35)"

Besides, Pearl S. Buck also wrote a lot about Chinese culture in *The Good Earth*, such as folk beliefs, funeral customs, Chinese feudal marriage system, traditional ethics and morals in rural areas at that time. In this regard, Wang Fengzhen mostly adopts domesticating translation method, which makes translation very close to the cultural background of the text, and also easy to read and understand.

After the reform and opening up, China has become more tolerant of foreign cultures, and thus Wang Fengzhen retains some foreign words in his translation, which is a kind of foreignization. For example:

"...if you wish to buy it and have the silver, it is weighed out in the room behind this, an ounce for a silver piece.(Buck, 2012, p. 237)"

王译:"如果你真的要买, 手里有银子, 在后面的房子里可以给你称。一盎司一块大洋。(赛珍珠, 2010, p. 213)"

Additionally, some other foreign words such as mile (英里), feet (英尺), and agent (经纪人) are retained directly in the translation.

On the whole, Wang's translation focuses on both domestication to reproduce traditional Chinese

culture and foreignization under the influence of the contemporary context to enrich the culture of the target language, which can be called an excellent translation.

4. Conclusion

“Cultural turn” is a revolutionary movement in the Western translation field, and its occurrence and development have had a wide and far-reaching impact on both the West and China. It brought translation and cultural studies closer together, and a large number of scholars and their theories have contributed to it. Many concepts in the cultural turn, such as translator’s visibility, creative treason, domesticating and foreignizing, provide a more in-depth exploration path for translation studies. Through theoretical and text analysis, it can be seen that Wang Fengzhen played the translator’s subjectivity in translation, consciously engaged in creative treason, and combined the strategies of domestication and foreignization, finally completing a relatively excellent translation. However, due to the ever-changing factors such as the background of the times, the cultural environment, the translation theory and the audience’s psychology, the translation still has a lot of questionable points, which is inevitable. In a nutshell, due to its vivid reproduction of the culture of rural China in the original work, as well as its fluent and precise writing, such an excellent literary translation should still be positively and encouragingly viewed, and also worthwhile for other translators to learn from it.

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