



**Full Length Review Article**

**FACTORS AFFECTING THE RECEPTION OF ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF CHINESE LITERATURE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Studies on the effect of English translation of Chinese literature are paid more attention especially with the national strategy of "Chinese Culture Going Global". Some scholars hold that the most effective way of evaluating the effect is the observance of the reader's reception. There exist some Western and Chinese translation theories on reader's reception. However, they cannot be used as the sole tool to evaluate reader's reception of English translations of Chinese literature. Some scholars put forward some criteria, such as numbers of the publications, questionnaires, reviews, etc., which are to some extent applicable. The factors behind these criteria affecting the reception of English translations of Chinese literature are yet to be studied. Therefore, this paper will first describe the relevant theories on reception in Western and Chinese translation theories and then give out the criteria of evaluating the reader's reception of English translation of Chinese literature. At last, such factors as language, social and political factors, translation models, types of readership in the English-speaking countries affecting the reception of English translation of Chinese literature will be discussed.

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**INTRODUCTION**

English translations of Chinese literature can be dated back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, though those translation activities were sporadic but unending. (Geng 2012: 44) Studies on the dissemination and reception of English translations of Chinese literature are paid more attention especially with the national strategy of "Chinese Culture Going Global". Some scholars hold that the most effective way of evaluating the effect is the observance of the reader's reception. (Wang 2012: 18) Some western and Chinese translation theories focused on reception, such as theories put forward by Cicero, Martin Luther, and Nida in western countries and Dao An, Hui Yuan, and Ma Jianzhong in China. However, they cannot be used as the sole tool to evaluate reader's reception of English translations of Chinese literature. Some scholars put forward some criteria, such as numbers of the publications, questionnaires, reviews, etc., which are to some extent applicable. The factors behind these criteria affecting the reception of English translations of Chinese literature are yet to be studied. Therefore, this paper will first describe the relevant theories on reception in Western and Chinese translation theories and then give out the criteria

of evaluating the reader's reception of English translation of Chinese literature. At last, such factors as language, social and political factors, translation models, types of readership in the English-speaking countries affecting the reception of English translation of Chinese literature will be discussed. The study helps to push forward the studies on "Chinese Culture Going Global".

**Western and Chinese translation theories on the reception**

**Western translation theories on the reception**

Among the Western translation theories, the earliest theory on reader's reception was put forward by Cicero who was the first to pay attention to reader's reception. Like other translators in translating Greek documents he adopted more freer translation methods but whose sole basis is the vocabulary chosen in the translation are acceptable for our people. He said, "If Greek writers find Greek readers when presenting the same subjects in a different setting, why should not Romans be read by Romans?" (Robinson 2002: 11) In the history of translating Bible, Martin Luther, a German religious reformer in the Renaissance, also paid close attention to the reader's reception in his translation statements and made the scope of readers clear. Luther's infusion of the Bible with the language of ordinary people and his consideration of translation in terms focusing on the Target Language and the Target Text reader

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were crucial. Typical of this is his famous quote extolling the language of the people: You must ask the mother at home, the children in the street, the ordinary man in the market [sic] and look at their mouths, how they speak, and translate that way; then they'll understand and see that you're speaking to them in German. Munday 2001: 23) This pointed out that Luther's most important contribution is on reader-orientation thus making Christianity walk into the ordinary family. Cicero and Luther believed it was more important to adjust the text to the target audience's needs and expectations. But how to evaluate their reception, no further relevant theories are mentioned.

However, it's truly difficult to evaluate the reader's reception. Nida stressed in his "dynamic equivalence", "A translation of dynamic equivalence aims at complete naturalness of expression, and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of his own culture", and "An easy and natural style in translating, despite the extreme difficulties of producing it—especially when translating an original of high quality—is nevertheless essential to producing in the ultimate receptors a response similar to that of the original receptors. Even though Matthew Arnold (1861, as quoted in Savory 1957: 45) himself rejected in actual practice the principle of "similar response," he at least seems to have thought he was producing a similar response, for he declares that, "A translation should affect its first hearers." Despite of Arnold's objection to some of the freer translations done by others, he was at least strongly opposed to the literalist views of such persons as F. W. Newman (1861: xiv). Jowett (1891), on the other hand, comes somewhat closer to a present-day conception of "similar response" in stating that, "an English translation ought to be idiomatic and interesting; not only to the scholar, but to the learned reader...The translator...seeks to produce on his reader an impression similar or nearly similar to that produced by the original." Souter (1920: 7) and R. A. Knox (1957: 5) almost expresses essentially this same view with Nida's. (See Nida, 1964: 159、163) But Nida was criticized for his "[...] producing in the ultimate receptors a response similar to that of the original receptors" which is so difficult to evaluate and put it to practice. Later on, Nida revised his theory in *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, "Dynamic equivalence is therefore to be defined in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language.

This response can never be identical, for the cultural and historical settings are too different, but there should be a high degree of equivalence of response, or the translation will have failed to accomplish its purpose". (Nida and Taber 1969: 24) Nida in the later part of the same book said, "This means that testing the translation does not consist in merely comparing texts to see the extent of verbal consistency or conformity (translators can be consistently wrong as well as consistently right), but in determining how the potential receptors of a translation react to it. In a sense this is something like market research, in which the response of the public to the product is tested, for regardless of how theoretically good a product might be or how seemingly well it is displayed, if people do not respond favorably to it, then it is not going to be accepted. This does not mean, of course, that a translation is to be judged merely on the extent to which the people like the contents". (Nida and Taber 1969: 163) Nida's theory of

"determining how the potential receptors of a translation react to it" actually taught how translators will do their translations according to the potential users' needs and expectations. He still looked to the potential users based on the textual level. However, we cannot find any criteria to judge the reception of translations.

### Chinese translation theories on the reception

Many eminent Buddhist translators and theorists in China paid attention to the reader's reception. Take Hui Yuan as an example. Hui Yuan put forward *jue-zhong-lun* (an "appropriate" method). He stated in "Dazhilun chao xu" (*Preface to A Collation of Extracts from [the Translation of] the Mahaprajnaparamita-sastra* [A Treatise on the Perfection of Great Wisdom Sutra]) that "To render a sutra that is unhewn [zhi ] into a translation that is refined [wen 文] is to provoke doubt and scepticism; and to render a sutra that is refined [wen 文] into a translation that is unhewn [zhi ] is to invoke the displeasure of most readers". (Cheung 2006: 107-108) In a word, both Dao An and Hui Yuan's statements on translation method paid attention to the reader's reception. In the modern Chinese translation history, Ma Jianzhong (1845-1900) put forward *shan-yi* ("good translation" theory), which advocates, "If readers can get all the impression and benefits as though they were reading the original text, then the translation is good." This argument is similar to the notion of equivalent effect which is about how close it comes to reproducing the same effect or response in the target readers that the source text produced in the source readers, (Baker 2004) which requires the equivalence of the readers' response to the text and is similar with Nida's.

### Comments

The above mentioned theories on reader's reception all agree that translation should be reader-oriented, that is, translators should make their translation practices according to the potential readers' needs and expectations. Furthermore, these theories are oriented to the target language and the target text readers, which can be applied to the studies on reception of English translation of Chinese literature. If Chinese literature translated into English, they are must be English reader oriented, not Chinese reader oriented instead. There are some opinions that English translation of Chinese literature must be faithful and must retain the literacy of the original works, otherwise they're bad translations. As a result, some translations under such translation criteria are not received well among English readers.

These opinions are influenced by the translation criteria popular among China. Whenever translations are mentioned in China, many people surely regard it as Chinese translations of foreign literature. And many scholars believe that translations should be done from foreign language to everyone's mother tongue. Consequently, when Chinese literature translated into English, some scholars still hold that the criteria of translating Chinese literature into English should be the same with the criteria of translating foreign literature into Chinese. These two different directions of translation should be oriented to different target readers; one is Chinese readers and the other English readers. One statement on translation in ancient China is "to translate' means 'to exchange', that is to say, to change

and replace the words of one language by another to achieve mutual understanding' (annotation provided by the 7th century annotator Jia Gongyan). (Jia 1983: 620). Let us now look at one more definition: "to translate' means 'to exchange', that is to say, take what one has in exchange for what one does not have" (definition provided by the Buddhist monk Zan Ning in "Tang Jingzhao Dajianfu Si Yizheng Zhuan Xilun") [Treatise on the biography of Yijing, monk of the Tang capital monastery of Dajianfu] (Zan 1987: 3-4). These two definitions of translation in ancient China reflect that translation includes two directions: one is translations from the foreign language to Chinese and one is translations from Chinese to the foreign languages. Translation practices in Western and Chinese translation history prove that translations from mother tongue to foreign languages always exist though not cover the main stream of the whole practice history. (Ma 2013: 17-18) It's a regret there is no relevant theory on reception in translations from mother tongue to foreign languages. However, whether they are translations from the foreign language to Chinese or translations from Chinese to the foreign languages, they all should orient their translations to the potential target readers' needs and expectations. Some studies have given some clues on how to evaluate the reception on English translations of Chinese Literature in the following.

### **Factors affecting the reception of the English translation of Chinese literature**

#### **Criteria for evaluating reception of English translation of Chinese literature**

Some scholars hold that the importance and necessity of considering reader's reception in Chinese literature translated into foreign languages, for which is rarely touched. Gao and Xu (2010) said that, "Promotion is less important than studies on the ways of dissemination in Chinese literature going global". And some scholars put forward some criteria to evaluate the reception tentatively.

#### **(1) Criteria One: Numbers**

Jiang (2007: 194-5) attempted to make an overall study on the history of the translation and dissemination of *Hongloumeng* in the English-speaking world, comparing Yang Xianyi's version and David Hawkes's version, with the aid of copies of translations, editions, borrowing records from the library, and etc. Wang (2012: 18) argued that success and failure of publishing English translations of modern Chinese literature should place the emphasis on four aspects, namely the publication and dissemination, the marketing and its effect, the feedback from different groups of readership, and joint ventures by Chinese and foreign publishers.

#### **(2) Criteria Two: A questionnaire**

Ma (2006: 161-226) found that there were no related case studies on western readers' reception of English translation strategy of Chinese poetry and Xu Yuanchong's Rhymed Version in Poetry Translation, hence, he made a questionnaire based on Miall and Kuiken's (1995) "Aspects of Literary Response: A New Questionnaire". But he made some adjustments according to the purpose of the survey and the characteristics of poetry translation to make a survey among

the western readers on their reception of Xu Yuanchong's Rhymed Version in Poetry Translation.

#### **(3) Criteria Three: Reviews of translations**

The reviews of a translated work is another way of examining the reception, since the reviews usually represent a 'body of reactions' to the author and the text (Brown 1994: 7) and form part of the sub-area of translation criticism in Holmes's 'map'. Translation reviews are also a useful source of culture's view of translation itself, as we saw Venuti (1998: 18-20) uses literary reviews as a means of assessing the reception of his foreignizing translation of Tarchetti. Venuti quotes reviews that criticize the translation specially because of its 'jarring' effect. This links in with Venuti's observations written in modern, general, standard English that is 'natural' and 'idiomatic'. (See Munday 2001: 156-157)

Finally, the reception of a translated work covers much richer than that of reviewers, encompassing a wide range of readership in different institutions and cultural settings. Furthermore, the cultural aspect of translation goes far beyond an analysis of the literary reception of a text and is entangled in an intricate web of political and ideological relations. Therefore, reception of translations is very difficult to quantify and be carried out empirically. Still some studies have attempted multiple factors to observe the reader's reception. Wang (2003:113) put forward a case study for reference, in which the researcher can observe the influences of translations from the aspects of sales statistics, questionnaires, letters from readers, and feelings in creation. In all, we should make a comprehensive consideration, especially should have a specific analysis of factors that affect readers' reception, rather than focusing on the intuitive sales, borrowed books and other numbers.

#### **Factors for evaluating the receptions more comprehensively**

Steiner (2001: 314) pointed out, "The import, of meaning and of form, the embodiment, is not made in or into a vacuum". The translation from foreign language to one's mother tongue is also not a vacuum. This also applies to the translation from one's mother to foreign language. Translation as a cross-cultural communication can never be dependent from the social and cultural environment. Historical, political, social, cultural, and ideological factors not only affect the translation motivation, translation strategy, and translation process, but also affect the reader's reception. In the following we will observe three main factors in affecting the reception.

#### **Language and culture**

According to Xie (2011), one problem "China going global" faces is the language gap. What is language gap? Xie defines it as a phenomenon in which it's easier for Chinese people to learn and master English both as a language and a culture than for Western people speaking British, French, German, Russian and other modern Western language to learn and master Chinese. This language gap makes more Chinese experts and scholars proficient in English, French, German, and Russian and other Western languages and cultures. But we cannot expect many experts and scholars fluent in Chinese and have a deep understanding of the Chinese culture, let alone the

experts and scholars of Chinese culture and many ordinary readers able to directly read Chinese works and having a deep understanding of the Chinese culture. The British colonial expansion gives rise to English as an invasive language. According to official statistics, China produced about 110,000 new titles in 2003 and 112,857 in 2005. Among the new titles for 2003 there were 10,000 new literary creations and 10,842 for 2005. But the number of those new titles that have been translated into other languages, as far as can be told from an extensive Internet search, was less than 100 in 2003, and almost the same in 2005, though these were mostly literary works. This means about 0.01% of Chinese books are being translated into other language, and for literary works the figure is about 0.01%. This figure does not include Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan, which also belong to Chinese literature in the sense of Chinese as a language. (See Allen 2007: 73-74) America in the past did not attach much importance to its translations of other literature and cultures for a long period of time, thus influencing the acceptance of literature of other countries among the ordinary readers. In addition, cultural policies that the United States had made toward foreign countries focused more on expansion, which is the one reason for the United States to import rare foreign books. (Gao, Xu, 2011-01-18)

### Types of readership

There are different translation modes of Chinese literature translated into the English world, thus their readerships are different. Mcdougall (2011: 5) figured out four modes of the translation of Chinese literature: academic translation, business translation, politically motivated translation and individual translation. These four models thus resulted in different characteristics of the target audience. The target audience of academic translation are usually the scholars who are engaged in academic researches and some college students. The academic translations are usually accompanied by guided reading, notes and thesaurus of difficult vocabulary, with background information of the original, and the subtle meanings of important words in reviews and interpretations of the original, which are very useful for researchers, but for ordinary readers just a verbose. *Modern Chinese New Fiction Series* edited by Howard Goldblatt published by University of Hawaii Press falls into this category. Different translation modes are designed for the different readership. So the translations in different groups receive differently. Only numbers cannot speak louder. In addition, publishers' publicity on translations may also influence the readers' reception. When Clements (2011: 41-42) studied on European readers' reception of *The Tale of Genji* translated into English by Mo Song Qian Cheng in 1882, he found that the ordinary people couldn't afford the binding beautiful, expensive translation. So Clements thus believed that the upper class, the rich, and those in power can afford it, while the ordinary people had easier access to reviews of the translation.

### Ideological manipulation

As a cross-language and cross-cultural communication behavior, from the outset, translation is inevitably marked by ideological imprint, which is a product of a certain society and culture. So the reader's reception of English translations of Chinese literature is inevitably influenced by one's ideology. Chinese and western translation theories all attached the importance of the ideological manipulation to translation

practice and the reader's reception. Take Dao An as an example. Dao An (c. 314-385) put forward a series of rules for translation called *wu-shi-ben* (which means "five cases in which the meaning of the original was lost") in his "Preface to Chinese Version of the *Prajnaparamita (Prajnaapaaramitaa Sutra)*." With *wu-shi-ben* he describes the conditions under which the translator would be allowed to "hujing shangzhi, qinren haowen, chuan ke zhongxin, feiwen buhe, si er-shi-ben ye (replace the unadorned style of the original with a graceful style so as to conform to Chinese readers' horizon of expectation, which is the second case in which the meaning of the original was lost)". (Chen 2000: 10-11) Different cultures have different ideologies. History tells us that the communication between different cultures is often the first ideological communication. In China, in the 18th century, when Jesuits preached Christianity, they translated some of Chinese literary works to foreign countries. The now widely cited the *English Anthology of Chinese Poetry* in the early years is an example. James Legge (1814-1897) translated *shijing* into *The She King*. However, Legge focused more on how to understand the Chinese people than on its literacy, in order to carry out their saint preaching smoothly in China.

### Conclusion

Reception of English translations of Chinese literature is very difficult to quantify and study empirically. One criterion cannot always be comprehensive enough to evaluate the reception of English translations of Chinese literature. Several criteria may be combined together to observe the reception. In all, when reader's reception is observed, it is necessary to make a comprehensive consideration. Furthermore, it's wise to make a specific analysis of factors that affect reader's reception according to different situations, rather than relying on the sales volume or the statistics and analysis of book loan quantity. As a result, such factors as language and culture, types of readership and ideological manipulation should be covered to satisfy the need of evaluating the reception of English translations of Chinese literature.

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