

## The Shifting Identity of Translation Studies in China

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**Abstract:** Because of an overwhelming interest in translation in recent years, Translation Studies has attracted considerable attention. Its disciplinary expansion in the 1990s has greatly increased its visibility. Yet its identity is still somewhat obscure, if not confusing. Translation Studies has borrowed theoretical paradigms and research methodologies from other disciplines, thus generating hybrid formations of transdisciplinarity. Thus it tends to focus on investigating the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary process of recognition, construction, confrontation, and transformation, which involves meaning, interpretation, signification, and representation. With dimensions of cultural and social attitudes, discourses, and myriad forms of power brought into Translation Studies to address the complex nature of translation practice, the subject has inevitably acquired an interdisciplinary identity. In an increasingly globalized world, academic research in China has long extricated itself from its past state of isolation. China has seen an unprecedented boom in Translation Studies thanks to its intercultural interaction with the outside world, brought about by massive translation practice, and Chinese translation scholars manifest an eagerness to learn from the West and also to play an active role in promoting the development of the discipline. Translation Studies purports to probe into the implications of translation strategies and resulting discourses, including conditions of signification and politics of appropriation.

**Keywords:** Definition, identity, subjectivity, interdiscipline, intercultural connectivity

### 1. Introduction

The traditional assumption of equivalence between source and target texts was closely associated with the linguistically oriented approach to translation in the 1960s and 1970s prior to the establishment of Translation Studies in its modern sense. The problematic nature of equivalence is reflected in its implicit assumption of sameness or similarity. It is potentially confusing and misleading. Moreover, the difficulty of employing this concept is further compounded by the possibility of different levels or aspects of equivalence. Thus, the inequality between source and target texts is nowadays underscored by a renewed urgency to redefine the concept of provenance or genesis of writing in the cross-cultural context of rewriting.

The politics of heterogeneity and difference inherent in translation leads deep into the labyrinthine workings of power, since translation is approached from alien, alienated and alienating perspectives and in a hierarchical relationship in which the translator wrestles with translation problems of whatever kind or nature. The ubiquity of translation in its broad sense has long been recognized as an integral part of human history. But Translation Studies, though relatively young as an independent discipline, is beset with an acute identity with a sense of

inferiority and marginality due to its derivativeness and thus subordination to the original. Thanks to the development of modern Translation Studies, the stigma attached to secondariness has lost much of its potency. Increasingly, the disciplinary marginality is felt to stand in the way of its development which is called for in a cross-cultural world. Consequently, a spirit of empowering marginality has been promoted partly also because of the omnipresence of translation that is of central relevance to other disciplines with regard to meaning, significance and adaptation. Not surprisingly, its virtual universal appeal and impact have attracted serious scholarly and critical attention, and meanwhile many arguments and debates about the nature of translation are contributing to the shifting identity of the discipline that remains in a perpetual state of metamorphosis.

The flow of ideas and the exchange of scholarly information have prompted critical rethinking of stereotypical assumptions about translation in China. And more significantly, profound conceptual changes have occurred and the huge amount of translation data emerging from its massive translation activities has created both challenges and opportunities for empirical and theoretical research. The success of the discipline in extending the frontiers of knowledge shows that it is increasingly possible to identify the defining characteristics of Translation Studies, which has become interdisciplinary or even transdisciplinary, distinguished by both depth and breadth. Thanks to interdisciplinarity, the scope of Translation Studies has expanded rapidly over the last two decades to deal with related aspects of and multiple dimensions to translation, and with helping incorporate new concepts and approaches derived from the work of other fields, which have added considerable rigor and sophistication to the discipline. Increasingly, the intercultural and communicative aspect of translation is regarded as fundamental to understanding the nature and function of translation.

## **2. Attempts to Define the Discipline**

Given the complex nature of translation, Translation Studies is increasingly troubled by difference of opinions as to how to define translation. In forecasting what may be the research areas for translation in the next decades, Tymoczko writes, “The first area of research can broadly be called attempts to define translation...” (Tymoczko, 2005, p. 1082). This, by implication, refers to a search for a sufficiently broad and inclusive definition of what constitutes translation but also, at the same time, registers a most profound irony. For, as Tymoczko points out, “during the last half century”, translation scholars have been doing precisely this and the problem of defining the activity remains apparently unresolved. And such attempts, as Tymoczko sees it, are by no means “trivial” (2005, p. 1083), because it is an absolute necessity to define translation for it to function as an identifiable entity. But it does not give a flattering light to this relatively young discipline. And this imbroglio is both mystifying and embarrassing: if half a century is not enough for a working definition to be formulated and future decades may still be needed, it seems to suggest that Translation Studies is still in a prolonged process of emerging rather than maturing. There is something oddly and deeply unsettling about this situation because by its very nature no emergence can be a forever process.

If all this sounds a bit gloomy, then it probably is, and the obvious weakness of Translation Studies is further exacerbated by the fact that different cultures treat and define translation

differently. Therefore, it is true enough that translation should not be circumscribed by a rigid definition, since the elasticity of substitution inherent in the nature of translation is different, often substantially, from language to language, and from culture to culture. It is the essentially undefinable elasticity that makes the task seemingly impossible. The definition issue is, in essence, theoretically based, as observed by Andrew Chesterman and Rosemary Arrojo:

Any definition of anything is theory-bound, so there is no such thing as a totally objective definition of “translation” that we can take for granted before we start studying it, as there will never be any definition of translation that will be all-inclusive. (2000, p. 152)

People do tend to take what constitutes translation for granted without questioning its nature and function. Chesterman and Arrojo proceed to point out: “Different scholars, with different research aims, tend to start (and end up) with different definitions” (2000, p. 152). In addition, the lack of precision for defining translation is attested by the widespread tendency to resort to a large variety of metaphors to indicate what translation is like.

Unequivocally, the comparative lack of coherence and sophistication associated with the thinking of translation is evidenced by definitional confusion. In view of this, Gernot Hebenstreit maintains: “... a multitude of definitions, especially if competing with each other, is quite often perceived as a typical symptom of fields of research that have not yet developed their theories to the necessary level of sophistication” (Hebenstreit, 2007, p. 197). This seemingly provocative statement points to the potential problems and pitfalls which may affect the identity of the discipline. For instance, “cultural turn” was promoted by scholars like Bassnett and Lefevere in 1990 to bring out the general relevance of cultural context to translation research so as to contextualize translation by highlighting cultural differences. This has helped to increase the cross-cultural awareness of translation, but the identity problem of Translation Studies is still bedeviled by the indefinable concept of culture itself. In this connection, Kaisa Koskinen raises the question: “What kind of empirical evidence is needed to prove the existence of a particular culture?” (Koskinen, 2004, p. 143). While “cultural turn” has liberated Translation Studies from the early formalist constraints, it is also blamed for “result[ing] in a watered-down conception of translation and its role in society” (Boyden, 2008, p. 151). This seems to suggest that, Translation Studies, though informed by interdiscipline, can be territorially circumscribed. It would be obviously inadvisable to isolate cultural mediation from social reform because in the long run, a broader perspective on the nature of Translation Studies is required for the further development of the discipline. Yet “cultural turn” has fittingly enhanced the awareness of intercultural translation, which is central to the communicative function of translation.

Nonetheless, the definition of translation has been greatly expanded, prompting “the veritable explosion of new theories regarding translation” (Gentzler, 1997, p. ix). Meanwhile, it is worth stressing that different cultures involved in translation must be mediated one way or another for the purpose of communication and also for the survival of the translated text. There is no way to compel universal acceptance of definite definition of translation. Either by a circuitous route, or through an active engagement with the source text, the translator produces a new text in its own right, thus claiming an original status as such. The increasingly

prominent issue of manipulation for whatever reason enhances the translator's visibility, and the repudiation of the simplistic, outmoded notion of absolute faithfulness to the original meaning has enabled and empowered translation scholars to examine and explore the nature and scope of the discipline in a new light. As a consequence, translation viewed as a process of continuity as posited by Walter Benjamin and further developed by Jacques Derrida signifies that the perception, at least in certain quarters, of the very nature of translation has changed significantly (Benjamin, 1968; Derrida, 1985).

Early translation research particularly concentrated on linguistic aspects of translation as epitomized by the influential essay by Roman Jakobson, entitled "On linguistic aspects of translation" published in 1959, providing a conceptual basis for a systematic approach to translation. In the budding years of Translation Studies in the 1960s and 1970s, not surprisingly, the discipline was generally identified with linguistics, since it was widely believed to be informed primarily, if not exclusively, by language subsumed under applied linguistics. Therefore, central to understanding the nature of translation was the assumption of sameness or the fundamental illusion of sameness that popularized such concepts as fidelity and equivalence. However, later developments in Translation Studies constituted what is called "a success story of the 1980s", characterized by interdiscipline, which broadened and more importantly, re-energized the field of translation research (Venuti, 1995a, p. vii). What happened to Translation Studies in the 1980s represented a substantial departure from a linguistically dominated approach, and some related disciplines, including linguistics itself, from which Translation Studies had benefited a great deal, brought different, refreshing perspectives to the field.

To be sure, the successful growth of Translation Studies is truly encouraging, but to put the situation in perspective, we need to acknowledge that the discipline still has a long way to go. Even so, Eve Tavor Bannet presents a somewhat overly optimistic reading of the status of Translation Studies:

After Jakobson, Benjamin, de Man, and Derrida, the scene of translation has radically changed. Translation has traveled from the periphery to center stage, where it serves as a metaphor for the work of the academy. Differences about the task of the translator have become a way of reframing and debating both the relation of our writings to "original" texts and the goals and upshot of our activities. (1993, p. 578)

While it may perhaps be both premature and exaggerated to say that translation has moved to "center stage", it is undeniable that since the activity of translation is recontextualized as a conscious effort, it can be examined more precisely in a refreshed and redirected sense of purpose.

### **3. Translation Studies in China**

It may be interesting to consider how Chinese translation scholars respond to the current lack of progress with regard to Translation Studies; they are less inclined to define translation; instead they seek to explore rather than to define various aspects of translation. The overriding concern of many Chinese translation scholars is how to develop Translation Studies in China

with its own theoretical system and methodology so as to claim to create the so-called Chinese characteristics. The feverish quest for identity is fundamentally about cultural politics but it is also meant to effectively analyze and provide more definitive answers to translation problems related to continuous cultural and political change in a country eager to establish its overall cultural promotion. There is an unprecedented urgency to this new found cultural confidence, which calls for a sweeping revitalization of traditional Chinese translation theory. It is true that past “theories” about translation are susceptible to neglect or even abandonment due to an overt impatience with frustrating stagnation. Over a century, Translation Studies in China was dominated by what was identified as three major difficulties in translation by Yan Fu in the preface to his translation of *Evolution and Ethics* by T. H. Huxley (1933, p. 1), namely faithfulness, lucidity, and elegance. The real challenge is to overcome the three at the same time. The combination of these difficulties has since been construed as a tripartite criterion or standard. Fan Shouyi, among many others, calls them “the three-character criteria” (1999, p. 33). Notwithstanding its practical usefulness, the famous dictum has been seen by many as responsible for the impasse of translation research in China as an institutionalized framework. There have been endless debates and expositions of the tripartite criterion to revive its relevance and bring it up to date.<sup>1</sup> It is increasingly recognized that adherence to the tripartite dictum or obsession with its various expositions will only hamper rather than help Translation Studies in China. In truth, the tripartite dictum has been polemical since its inception: many attempts have been made to define or redefine it but generally without much success.

Back in the 1950s, it became obvious that Translation Studies in China required theoretical breakthroughs. Dong Qiusi, in an article entitled “Lun fanyi lilun de jianshe” (On the construction of translation theory) in *Translation Newsletter*, made the proposal to establish Translation Studies as a discipline, claiming that “China has a long history of translation and, in spite of the lack of systematic theorization, has acquired an abundance of scattered and unconsolidated experiences and ideas” (Dong, 2004, p. 225). Dong projected a sanguine prognosis largely based on this perception of China’s long history of translation. With the wisdom that hindsight affords, Tan Zaixi ruefully notes: “In the 1950s China was behind no other country in terms of the construction of Translation Studies. Had Dong Qiusi’s idea caught everyone’s attention, our translation research might have been ahead of the West all along” (1995, p. 15). However, this optimism is retrospectively ungrounded because China was soon afterwards plunged into great social and political upheaval and its embryonic intercultural connectivity would be severed. Translation Studies could not develop until the early 1980s when translation activity was in full swing once again, fuelling an interest in analyzing translation problems as well, since large scale translation practice created renewed impetus for promoting Translation Studies. Meanwhile, a profound change was the growing disenchantment with traditional Chinese translation theory, which came to be seen as insufficiently theoretical and unduly fragmentary. And in view of this changed perception, many translation scholars were unwilling to allow the tripartite dictum of *xin, da, ya* to continue to trammel translation research as it seemed to have little to offer and was even regarded by some to be decidedly inhibiting.

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<sup>1</sup> Some have argued that it derived from Alexander Fraser Tytler’s *Essay on the Principles of Translation* (1907), while others have taken pains to demonstrate the fundamental differences between the two.

There is little doubt that Translation Studies in China lagged behind the West, and subsequently it went through a period of reflection, and more significantly, self-criticism. Thus, starting from the 1980s, the relatively well developed translation theory in the West was embraced with such enthusiasm by translation scholars in search of a new and more vigorous conception of translation. The works of Nida, Newmark, Catford, Holmes and others swamped China, including *Toward a Science of Translating* (1964), *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (1965), and *A Textbook of Translation* (1988).<sup>2</sup> Nida was introduced to China in the 1980s, and due to its comparative newness, his theory was found to be a long awaited alternative to the traditional view of translation. There is a historical reason for Nida's extraordinary popularity in China, and with its emphasis on form rather than content, his translation theory had a particular appeal to the Chinese for its emphasis on reader's response. The possibility for translation to transform form, with the aim to facilitate reading, was construed as liberating it from the constraints of rigid faithfulness.

Then, the task to establish Translation Studies as an independent discipline in China was undertaken with a sense of urgency. In 1987 an article published in *Chinese Translators Journal* sparked heated debates about the state and significance of Translation Studies, which was regarded to be still in an uninspiring chaos of unrealized possibilities. Yet unmistakably, with many Western works on Translation Studies being introduced to China, a change of position and perspective ensued regarding how to conduct research on translation. If all this was still somewhat disorientating, in the absence of a standardized methodology — the Chinese tending to find such a methodology reassuring — the otherwise academically conservative culture was compelled to consider different and indeed, diverse approaches to translation. But open hostility displayed by many translation practitioners toward translation theory was somewhat astonishing. As noted by Xie Tianzhen, for a long period in China, “a broader ethos took hold of translation circles in China that Translation Studies is nothing but empty talk: the real talent lies in the ability to produce good quality translation works” (Xie, 2001, p. 2). To counterbalance these deep-seated problems, some translation scholars strove with great vigor for the dissolution of the traditional way of looking at translation, which was typically symptomatic of an impressionistic meditation on translation problems based on the actual but inevitably limited experiences of translation practitioners.

It was commonly held that Nida's translation theory, presenting the possibility for a refreshing change, heralded the end of “consensus” about how to conduct translation research and broke the confines of traditional thinking. It also seemed to denote, for many Chinese scholars, a substitute for Yan Fu's tripartite dictum as a neat formula for translation practice, but a peculiar Chinese obsession with practice as opposed to theory still featured prominently in the 1980s. However, after enjoying about two decades of popularity in China today, Nida's theory is treated more reflectively and with some epistemological skepticism. Some years after Nida was countenanced in China, critical voices calling for re-examination began to be raised, and he

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<sup>2</sup> Such works include Nida's *Toward A Science Of Translating : With Special Reference To Principles And Procedures Involved In Bible Translating* (1964), Newmark's *Approaches to Translation* (1981), Catford's *A Linguistic Theory of Translation : An Essay In Applied Linguistics* (1965), and Holmes's *The Nature of Translation: Essays on the Theory and Practice of Literary Translation* (1970).

was thought, among other things, to place overt emphasis on reader's response. And according to Liu Yingkai, the resulting excessive acculturation in an attempt to "save the trouble" for the target reader meant disrespect for the author and the source text. In this connection, extensive sinicization was traced to Buddhist translation practice, and this practice denies the target reader their desire or need for authenticity (Liu, 1997, p. 2). It was obviously felt that Nida's theory would encourage and reinforce such a practice.

After Nida, Catford, Newmark, Willis representing linguistic approach to translation, works by Bassnett, Lefevere, Hermans, Even-Zohar, and Toury, together with poly-system, manipulation theory, norm principles, feminist criticism, and post-colonialism, were introduced to China one after another, in rapid succession. Not surprisingly, the ideological dimension of Translation Studies examined by Andre Lefevere was particularly pertinent to a country that had long been under the domination of ideology. *Translation, History and Culture* (edited by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere) was particularly influential in China. Hermans was well known for his edited volume *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation* (1985), and Toury's *In Search of a Theory of Translation* (1980) aroused considerable interest as well. Numerous case studies were provided, sometimes to a tedious extent, to illustrate the "relevance" of the concept of ideology to translation practice in China. In the meantime, more attention was paid to the so-called pure theory. Xie Tianzhen, among others, argues that one must not confine oneself to things about "how to translate [largely related to experience] and should transcend it to attain a higher level of theorizing" (Xie, 2001, p. 3). The former practice is only for beginning translators and the latter for translation researchers. However, it is debatable where to draw the line of demarcation and "how to translate" requires theorizing as well. But the drive for theory *per se* has amounted to an overpowering argument for the legitimacy of translation theory in China.

The aesthetic attractions of pure theory are yet to be enhanced in China. Theoretical awareness is thought to be of some use to shed light on the nature and operation of translation. In 1987, functionalist approaches to translation began to receive serious attention and up to 2005, more than 100 articles were published (Bian & Cui, 2006, pp. 82-88). Such approaches have been extensively applied to a vast array of translation practices of adaptive functioning. But curiously, there is barely any mention of the fact that Chinese translators during the late Qing period were early functionalist practitioners, when typically it was held that the end justified the means. The prevalence of such a practice demonstrated candid disingenuousness in a graphical display of defiance of authenticity, and for that matter, reliability. But the issue of legitimacy did not seem to raise any serious concern, perhaps because the constraints of referentiality proved to be overwhelmingly troublesome. In a way, the famous translator Yan Fu was a functionalist, although faithfulness was alleged to be the most important factor in translation as clearly set forth by him. It is a pity that Chinese translation scholars were too busy impugning Yan Fu's ostensible disregard of detailed accuracy in his own translation practice in spite of his great emphasis on fidelity to theorize the underlying nature of his approach which is none other than a functionalist one.

The openness to international scholarship enabled Chinese Translation Studies to benefit from approaching translation from different perspectives. However, it is noteworthy that few countries are like China where Translation Studies has been steeped in controversy as

such. After the initial exuberance, Western translation theories met with voices of suspicion, doubt and denigration. All this seemed to immediately create a distinctly colonial experience, raising the central question of the possibility of cultural violence that posed a threat to the target culture. This has become a source of acute anxiety about cultural identity and about the profound implications of extensive uncritical borrowings. It is plain that the issue of suitability and relevance has to be examined. It was not uncommon in the 1980s and 1990s that translation theories developed in the West and other parts of the world but indiscriminately subsumed under the category of the West were considered not relevant to or suitable for the translation practice in China; the underlying assumption was that the usefulness of theory was closely linked with whether it could be applied to the actual translation practice. But the disconcerting fact was that many of those holding antagonistic views about Western translation theories were contented with scant knowledge of them. Cultural and political prejudice and Chinese chauvinism formed the basis of this enmity, to contrast sharply with scholarly critiques of Western thinking on translation later on as part of a creative academic dialogue.

#### **4. Intercultural Attitude and Translation**

Debates on the nature and identity of Translation Studies in China have been conducted on a broadly cultural-political level, and while alternative understandings of translation are provided, the relationship between colonizer and colonized becomes a major conundrum. Some scholars have long been distrustful of Western translation theories for fear of cultural colonization. Echoing Frederick Jameson, Wang Yuechuan remarks: “The first world is in control of the initiative power of exporting culture, imposing it on the third world, which is on the peripheral, and thus can do nothing but accept it passively” (Wang, 1997, p. 159). Perhaps it is not too much of an imposition, but more precisely, a somewhat reluctant self-imposition in the case of China because it was forced to learn from the West largely through translation. And in this respect, translation has played an instrumental part through involuntary complicity. According to Zhou Jueliang, translated works account for almost two thirds of fiction published during the late Qing dynasty (1994, p. 192). At the heart of the problem is the question of cultural identity. One typical response to challenges posed to cultural identity is the undertaking to curb the infiltration of foreign thinking into a vital Chinese cultural territory through cultural translation. However, it seems necessary to be aware of the changed political, and cultural configuration concerning foreign borrowings. Wang Dongfeng cautions against accepting Western theory at face value, enunciating that one’s political standing determines the outcome of an argument as in the case of discussing foreignization and domestication which have long been commonly adopted strategies in translation. They may be good for either colonization or decolonization, depending on one’s political stance (2003, p. 4).

Cultural and political fear is generated by the possibility that research on translation in China can be endangered by Western erosions. Admittedly, however, aside from cultural prejudice and political expediency, fundamental issues regarding the conceptual understanding of translation must not be eschewed. Rethinking translation invariably entails localization of foreign theories, which has to be conducted in a critical way so that any rejection or resistance, no doubt necessary in some cases, is well justified. Increasingly, a somewhat nihilistic attitude

toward traditional Chinese translation discourse is viewed as inimical to indigenous thinking on translation. Therefore, a more rational conception of Translation Studies has been developed. As a way out, one translation scholar stresses that the prospect of the development of Translation Studies in China hinges on “the degree to which Western and Chinese translation theories are combined” (Wu, 1998, p. 51). It seems that people tend to be in consensus that different translation theories, Western or Chinese, can supplement one another, which seems the only way forward for translation research in China.

Since an article published by Liao Qiyi in *Waiguoyu* [*Foreign Languages*] in 1998 first introduced Lawrence Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility*, a great deal of interest has been aroused in foreignization. The classical dichotomy between form and sense inherent in translation that creates the difference between literal and free translation has resulted in a series of articles. Some scholars view foreignizing translation as an extension of literal and free translation, and from 2000 to 2005, more than 300 articles devoted to foreignization and domestication were published (Jiang & Zhang, 2007, p. 39). The discussion of foreignizing translation is placed in a post-colonial context by a number of scholars. For instance, Venuti's concept of resistant translation has been examined and recontextualized in relation to Chinese history in an article entitled “Diguo de fanyi baoli yu fanyi de wenhua dikang: Venuti dikangshi fanyiguan jiedu” [Translation violence of the empire and cultural resistance of translation: Reading of Venuti's resistant translation], in which the author finds Venuti's work inspirational and raises unsettling questions for local scholars concerning “the former Chinese Empire (...) in uniting 56 nationalities in China; the author also raises the inevitable questions: what about the translation strategies adopted when dealing with those nationalities with their own languages? Are there any traces of cultural hegemony in translation?” (Wang, 2007, p. 84).

Foreignizing translation has impelled a revisiting of foreignization and domestication as a logical extension of literal and free translation in the cultural and translation history of China. The eternal dispute dates back to Buddhist translation in ancient China, and according to Guo Yanli, it started from Dao An, a Buddhist monk of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (AD 317-420) (Guo, 1998, p. 71). In the 1920s and 30s, a major dispute erupted about the division between literal and free translation, which was highly politicized, involving, most notably, Lu Xun and Liang Shiqiu. A compelling argument against free translation was contained in the metaphor that it forced foreigners to wear Chinese costumes, thereby erasing foreignness embedded in the source text, whereas those who opposed literal translation pronounced that stylistic awkwardness caused by this approach would hamper meaning and readability. In the 1980s, a similar dispute occurred again, albeit in a different political context. This time some translation scholars took the pains to distinguish literal translation and free translation from foreignization and domestication. In general, the discussion of literal and free translation was conducted at a technical, operational level, in an attempt to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable chasm between meaning and form, whereas the focal point about foreignization and domestication was considered to be about local knowledge, reflected by the insider/outsider dichotomy, and also, as Wang Dongfeng puts it, “cultural identity, literariness and the gain or loss of power of discourse” (Wang, 2002, p. 25). The issue in question concerns not only the efficacy of communication, but also the influence of cross-cultural exchange on equal terms, with regard to the relationship between translation and discursive forms of postcolonialism.

Translation Studies in the context of China has done much to address and becomes ever more entangled with the critical issues of cultural identity. It can be said that cultural identity is best defined in a particular cultural form, which constitutes the implicit underlying assumption that foreignization strategy helps strengthen the cultural identity of the host community. Venuti argues:

... the identity-forming process was repeatedly grounded in domestic dialogues and institutions. This suggests that they were all engaged in an ethnocentric reduction of possibilities, excluding not only possible representations of foreign cultures, but also possible constructions of domestic subjects. (Venuti, 1995, p. 22)

Rejecting foreign cultures in their authentic forms is believed to be inimical to the formation of domestic cultural identity because this means that with barely a chance to change and develop a given culture, cross-cultural perspectives cannot be developed. Moreover, linguistic differences are important boundary markers, and if they are erased, the performance of cultural identity of the foreign will be in doubt.

On the other hand, the hegemonic way of translating precludes the renegotiation of terms for acceptability, which takes precedence over many other factors. It is a sheer act of invasion by simply eliminating or reducing most outward traces of foreign cultural identity. Nevertheless, Venuti acknowledges the possibility of foreignization that may

risk unintelligibility, by decentering domestic ideologies too far, and cultural marginality, by destabilising the workings of domestic institutions. Yet since nonethnocentric translation promises a greater openness to cultural differences, whether they are located abroad or at home, they may well be worth the risks. (Venuti, 1995, p. 23)

It is clearly desirable to increase the openness of the host community so as to allow cultural differences to produce impacts on the target language and its cultural identity. Venuti looks anew at some of the difficult and resilient questions about cultural identity and belongingness, and about foreign otherness and politics of translation.

But foreignization, if it is so argued, may oversimplify the political map of translation. It is worth pointing out that the issue of foreignization is dealt with by Venuti from one specific perspective. Once the perspective shifts, foreignization can be seen, if taken to its logical conclusion, as capable of subverting or undermining the target culture. Why cannot the latter, as argued by Venuti in the case of hegemonic language inherent in foreignizing translation, also benefit from such a strategy? Such an overtly politicized approach to translation has limitations and disadvantages. It amounts to a rejection of the unmediated, dogmatic view that insists on foreignizing translation from a minor or less influential language. In addition, it also fortuitously reveals the precarious nature of Translation Studies, which is determined by the shifting perspective and changing political concerns of a given culture at a given historical time. Thus, it can be argued that regardless of the target readers' response, indiscriminate foreignization is not only thoughtless but seriously irresponsible principally for the reason that a culturally unmediated encounter with the original is ill-suited for communication of cultural messages.

At the center of its tradition, Chinese translation has been intrinsically unsympathetic to foreignization, and those who championed and practiced foreignization, including Lu Xun and Dong Qiusi, have not attracted a large following. However, the situation begins to change somewhat with increased cultural confidence on the part of the Chinese. Sun Zhili, for instance, has championed the advantage of foreignization as a translation strategy: it not only imparts the “exotic flavor” of the original but also, echoing Lu Xun, “introduces modes of expression from the source language” (Sun, 2001, p. 33). As a translation practitioner as well, Sun conducts a perspicacious practical reasoning: while foreignization is cross-culturally desirable, it does not always work in practice and some degree of domestication in the form of acculturation is necessary and inevitable (Ibid.). However, Sun argues that foreignization as a preferred translation strategy will become more widespread with more cross-cultural exchanges (Ibid., p. 35). This shift in attitude toward foreignization signifies an ever increasing openness to intercultural exchange.

In general, a commitment to cultural inclusiveness is precipitated by the development of the willingness in China to learn from other cultures and the desirable possibility of other cultures understanding and appreciating the Chinese culture. The flexible “inclusiveness” that seems so commendable and extends to race, gender, class, and religion plays on the cultural unconscious, and on relative importance, urgency, contemporary relevance and proximity to reality. In this regard, Translation Studies can be invigorated by reworking of cultural and political identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions. Therefore, the identity of the translator becomes simultaneously plural and mutable, and in view of this, some degree of acculturation in translation is not only necessary but also the key to assure the success of translation through increasing intercultural connectivity and interaction.

## **5. Subjectivity, Intersubjectivity and Cultural Rewriting**

The relative relaxation of ideological control in China in recent years has stimulated a rethinking of the notion of subjectivity in relation to translation, which has become a topic for research after a seemingly undue emphasis on a high degree of collectivity in the past when subjectivity was commonly associated with bourgeois individualism. Translation is, as famously stated by Derrida, “necessary and impossible” (Derrida, 1985, p. 170), and important theoretical issues, such as the translator’s subjectivity as an active agent in (re)creating meaning in cross-cultural communication, are brought to the fore. Translation represents subjectivity, intersubjectivity and language, and the freeing of subjectivity that informs the practice of translation allows the translator to exercise productive as well as interpretative leeway either in conformity with, or in resistance of, a given political and/or cultural preference. The role of the translator in shaping the outcome of translation is increasingly recognized as part of active intervention. In this respect, the creativity of the translator has been foregrounded to a large extent by translation scholars, notably Lawrence Venuti and Douglas Robinson. This no doubt reaffirms the primacy of translator’s subjectivity, which is also demonstrated to merit further investigation so as to shed light on how it works in translation. Different kinds of subjectivity constitute the topic that has been intensely researched in China, both theoretically and empirically.

With an increasing emphasis on subjectivity, the translated text is regarded as much less subordinate to the original. This changed perception has produced a liberating effect on translation scholars, leading to more participatory approaches to Translation Studies. Chinese translation scholars are interested in subjectivity, or rather, subjectivities, represented by the author, the translator and the reader respectively. And since the 1990s, the concept of subjectivity has inspired an unprecedented enthusiasm for its application to Translation Studies. Notable attempts have been made to develop a general theory of subjectivity with reference to translation. Yuan Li argues that the sole subjectivity involved in translation is that of the translator (2003, p. 75). Xu Jun, while acknowledging the existence of three subjectivities in relation to translation, argues for the central subjectivity of the translator (2003, p. 11). However, despite a changed perspective on the erstwhile marginalized subjectivity of the translator, it cannot move beyond the constraints of norms inherent in the target system, as is argued in an article probing the tension between individuality and conformity and offering an analysis of the interrelationship between the translator's subjectivity and a different set of norms in the target system (Sun, 2003, pp. 3-9). In summary, translation is more closely related to the construction of subjectivity and fosters vital creativity that arises out of an intersubjective matrix of strategies.

Moreover, rewriting, deconstruction and the broadening of subjectivity of the translator have carved out a space for examining gendered subjectivity, which gives prominence to the previously obscured female identity as reified in an ever increasing awareness of the possibility of different points of view and responses in experiencing the translated text. The study of gender issues in relation to translation by such Western scholars as Sherry Simon and Louise von Flotow has inspired a similar feminist approach to translation in China. In effect, Sherry Simon's *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* was often referred to by Chinese translation scholars. And articles published by Louise von Flotow were cited from time to time in China. But the introductory work began relatively late, only in 2000 (Liao, 2000, p. 302). Earnest interest was shown in 2002, and since then, more than 20 journal articles following this approach have appeared. It is clear that a gender perspective has expanded the range of positions underlying complex methodological problems so as to reconstruct the translator's subjectivity in the contexts of postmodernism and postcolonialism.

Indeed, this burgeoning area of research has afforded a promising prospect for some interesting case studies as a manifestation of feminist thinking on translation in Chinese translation. By way of an example, Meng Xiangzhen discusses in an article on feminist translation how two translation versions of one passage in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* by one female translator and male translator are offered respectively: "She was slender and apparently scarcely past girlhood: and an admirable form ..." The female translator renders it as: 她苗条, 显然还没有过青春期。挺好看的体态 ... And the male translator's version is: "她长得纤细, 显然不久前还是个未嫁的姑娘: 令人羡慕的身材..." After comparing the two versions, the author of the article concludes that both versions are fairly "faithful to the original" but in terms of choice of words, the different male and female aesthetic views "can be discerned" as in "an admirable form". It is rendered as "挺好看的体态" "a fairly pretty figure" (back translation) by the female translator and "令人羡慕的身材" "a figure that is admirable" (back translation) by the male translator (Meng, 2002, p. 33-34). It seems obvious that the male

translator admires the girl more than the female translator, and certainly his version is more “faithful”. However, the author of the article in question fails to note the different treatments of “girlhood” in translation, which is no doubt a much more sensitive word. And in this case, the female translator is more “faithful”: her version is 青春期, which technically means “pubescence” but extends to mean “youthhood”. Yet the version by the male translator is “not long ago she had been an unmarried girl (back translation), although “girlhood” in the source text gives no indication of marital status. Meng points out that, as compared with the West, the status of men is given more prominence in the Chinese cultural tradition.

After postcolonial theory was imported into China, postcolonial translation theory began to capture the imagination of some translation scholars. In 2001, the publication of an anthology (Xu & Yuan, 2001), in Chinese translation, of essays by Western scholars such as Michael Foucault, bell hooks, Gayatri Spivak, Sherry Simon and Lawrence Venuti, entitled *Yuyan yu fanyi de zhengzhi* [Language and the Politics of Translation], was significant in prompting a series of articles in response to postcolonial translation theory. The early 2000s witnessed a powerful surge of interest in politically sensitive aspects of translation. And recent developments in feminist theory and gender studies in general, and feminist thinking on translation in particular, are of great importance to Translation Studies in China (Meng, 2002, p. 35). This fits with a more general tendency that anything political, including ideology and power, is subsumed under the postcolonial theory that has provided a “convenient” framework for more extensive discussion about translation issues, and thus can be viewed as an extension of ideology in the field of Translation Studies. For example, three monographs were published based on the authors’ doctoral dissertations: In 2005, Fei Xiaoping published *Fanyi de zhengzhi: fanyi yanjiu yu wenhua yanjiu* [The Politics of Translation: Translation Studies and Cultural Studies], representing a rethinking of traditional Chinese translation theory, and of political issues in translation. This book can be seen as an attempt to apply postcolonial translation theory to Chinese cases. In the same year, *Pubian yu chayi: houzhimin piping shiyuxia de fanyi yanjiu* [Universalism and difference: Translation Studies from the perspective of postcolonial criticism] (Sun, 2005) was published. It is a comprehensive study of postcolonial translation theory and offers some new thinking on the further development of Translation Studies in China.

Important developments in the field of Translation Studies have been closely monitored by Chinese translation scholars and graduate students alike. In spite of its history of so-called semi-colonialism, China has to face the complexities of a different postcolonial experience in preparing the ground for cultural modernity. For historical and political reasons, China is a late player in Translation Studies in its modern sense, yet since the country resumed contact with the outside world in the late 1970s, the discipline has been gaining recognition and even popularity. Many graduate programs in Translation Studies and translation and interpreting training have cropped up in recent years. Yet the underlying reason for this unprecedented disciplinary expansion is not strictly academic in some cases: a prospective graduate student may be over-awed by the demanding subjects of literature and linguistics, so Translation Studies seems to be an obvious choice. While there is considerable ignorance on the part of some of the applicants for translation research, perhaps this seemingly heightened misperception reflects part of the reality of the discipline, which is unfortunately associated with lack of rigor. Nonetheless, many graduate students in China pursue Translation Studies in earnest. And it is

indeed encouraging that as a result, the discipline is flourishing, with many translation scholars being trained. There is a sure sign that Translation Studies is experiencing an unprecedented boom; numerous national conferences and symposiums have been held in the last few years, and more than 200 books on Translation Studies including reprints of foreign ones have been published.<sup>3</sup>

Most significantly, the active agency of the translator is asserted to recognize the shifting character of Translation Studies, which is at once disorienting and clarifying. Many issues concerning the nature of translation are re-articulated in different cultural, social and historical contexts and from postcolonial and postmodern perspectives to be endowed with greater explanatory power, precision, and clarity. In particular, views, reflections and theoretical thinking about translation between China and the West are becoming more sophisticated and systematic. However, concerns have been raised about the general state of Translation Studies in China where an “unbalanced development”, as observed by Liao Qiyi (2006, p. 7), is ascribed to insufficient critiques by Chinese scholars in absorbing Western translation theories. In this light, the development of new research methodologies is not much in evidence, and even if some new methodologies are made available through other disciplines, it is not clear how such methodologies can be applied to translation research, because there is a lack of critical assessment of the application of those methodologies in Translation Studies (Liao, 2000, p. 7). All this is due to the fact that there are comparatively few innovative approaches and solutions to theoretical issues related to Chinese cultural and social settings.

The encouraging fact is that important and innovative work that is being done in the West now receives timely attention in China. Meanwhile, the localized Western scholarship on translation is enriched by manifold indigenous cultural forms and social conditions interspersed with Chinese insights. Translation scholars are thus empowered to enter into a dialogicity of difference with the original author in investigating the (re)production of meaning in a cross-cultural context. And the source text is no longer treated as a predetermined and inflexible text. This no doubt changes the power relation between author and translator in the traditional sense. Therefore, re-readings are more critical, taking a more active, participatory role — it seems natural to look for traces of intervention or manipulation in translation, including deletions, insertions and blatant distortions, and to raise questions about why certain parts are eliminated or added by the translator, and so on. Having realized that belligerent defensiveness may not be helpful for further inquiry, translation scholars are in a better position to develop more innovative and meaningful ways to analyze theoretical issues about translation.

## **6. Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Approach to Translation**

An intensification of interdisciplinary awareness deriving from studying foreign translation theories has energized and expanded the field of translation research. Speaking of “the ...

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<sup>3</sup> Two university presses in Shanghai and Beijing have negotiated with Western publishers for the copyright to republish a series of titles on Translation Studies at affordable prices to general readers as well as university students (mostly graduate students).

interventionist stance of many of today's feminist translation scholars", Melissa Wallace observes that many of the scholars have become "transgressors, subversives, interventionists, and authors in their own right" (2002, p. 69). In this respect, Susan Bassnett strikes an optimistic note, "... Translation Studies is more comfortable with itself, better able to engage in borrowing from and lending techniques and methods to other disciplines" (2002, p. 3). However, its current dependence on other disciplines, considered to be pertinent as the situation requires it, can be a cause for concern. There is no denying that Translation Studies needs to feed on its neighbouring disciplines for its development as an independent discipline, but paradoxically, if it is identified as interdiscipline, the discipline itself seems to lack a distinctive identity. And this lack of identity and to some extent, legitimacy as well, has resulted in a mix of embarrassment, uneasiness, outrage and (self-)denial, which explains why some Chinese scholars are so apprehensive about the disciplinary "deficiency", which is seen to lack an impact on other disciplines.

To redefine the notion of "translation" has become a chronic problem and the attempt to do so is to some extent frustrated by the fact that a different system of representation is behind every translation. Douglas Robinson has raised the inevitable question: "Translation is steeped in power relations, between men and women, between colonizers and the colonized, between academics and professionals. What next?" (Robinson, 1997, p. 3) Whatever the answer may be, it has become increasingly essential to examine the various conditions, historical, social, political and above all, cultural, for translation and its research.

Translation research defies being easily and rigidly compartmentalized. But this is precisely the dilemma that confronts Translation Studies: it is pulled apart by other disciplines, which then threatens the core of its identity because it needs to feed on and benefit from such disciplines. Bassnett points out that

... despite the diversity of methods and approaches, one common feature of much of the research in Translation Studies is an emphasis on cultural aspects of translation, on the contexts within which translation occurs. Once seen as a sub-branch of linguistics, translation today is perceived as an inter-disciplinary field of study and the indissoluble connection between language and way of life has become a focal point of scholarly attention. (2002, pp. 2-3)

The continued emphasis on the cultural dimensions of translation has proved to be particularly useful in enhancing our understanding of the complexity of cross-cultural communication since the discipline shifted away from being overly dependent on linguistics. On the other hand, anti-linguistic tendencies seem to be rectified, even though linguistics has not exactly made a comeback in translation research. In any case, it does not make much sense for interdisciplinarity to exclude linguistics in Translation Studies.

It has been accepted that Translation Studies needs to cross disciplinary borders in order to respond to the shifting paradigms and priorities of translation in response to the changing related political, cultural and social situations. Also, cross-disciplinary perspectives help outline the underpinnings of Translation Studies so as to shape its discourse. Consequently, the identity of Translation Studies is itself also a shifting one, largely due to a growing recognition

of the importance of fostering cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary perspectives, and due also to the political or cultural approaches or factors that are particularly relevant to the identity and cause it to be reshaped. Moreover, because it is constantly evolving and developing from related disciplines, the identity of Translation Studies is inherently subject to change and can be re-contextualized insofar as other related disciplines evolve. Translation Studies is becoming a specialist discipline with the achievement of its own disciplinary identity. Significantly, the identity of Translation Studies is commonly known as informed by interdisciplinary approaches, and precisely because of its interdisciplinary nature, the identity of Translation Studies varies with other related disciplines whose identities do not indicate norms of univocality either.

While identity is only meaningful in relation to difference, it is also a matter of recognition. In this sense, the issue of identity is invariably political. Factors such as how Translation Studies is projected and perceived by the general public, and above all, what it does in actuality, are very important in the formation of its identity. Since translation is a reading-writing activity, any irreducible complex debates about meaning, intention, interpretation and context surrounding reading and writing that are directly related to Translation Studies, if anything, are even more complex — certainly complex enough to sustain an interest in it as significantly different from other disciplines. Yet as the focal concern of Translation Studies keeps shifting, translating a text is no longer regarded as a pure translinguistic activity; instead it is increasingly associated with cultural translation embedded in political and ideological (re)writing. At the core of translation is a process of re-establishing a system of signification with its ways and means of changing and (de)constructing meaning, which prompts translation scholars to explore the cognitive, cultural, discursive, political, and historical dimensions of Translation Studies.

As a medium of cross-cultural communication, translation calls constantly for a rethinking of cultural identity, which is at its core associated with the change of the identity of Translation Studies. Just like translation, Translation Studies is customarily seen as secondary and derivative, thus acquiring a stigmatized identity. Also, in a strange twist of irony, there is genuine concern about Translation Studies primarily showing a lack of identity. Yet such a situation is inevitable since Translation Studies functions in line with the diversified nature of translation practice. However, the internally heterogeneous and overlapping nature of the related disciplines moves towards developing a consistent and coherent pattern in Translation Studies, which is essentially different from other related disciplines with its emphasis firmly on cross-linguistic and inter-cultural communication. So some kind of identity can still be found for Translation Studies.

However, the experience of cultural translation, either direct or indirect, raises the awareness of its subversive political potential. Translation is invariably a hybrid product that incorporates incongruities into a composite of the foreign and the local. It entails a process involving cultural politics and ideological incommensurability, making apparent destabilizing effects that both confirm and disrupt cultural identities. Cultural superiority or inferiority, together with varying degrees of openness, which vacillates between rejecting and embracing the foreign other in China in its long history of searching for modernity through translation, dictates how normative translation strategies are shaped and reshaped. As a form of re-writing, translation is informed by approaches sensitive to cultural politics as rooted in cultural identity which, if not properly perceived or handled, is prone to foment social acrimony. China has experienced many facile

misunderstandings of the West and vice versa for lack of communication. Insufficient translation is to blame. Translations into Chinese have created a catalytic impact in changing the terms of debate across many cultural, social and political areas.

Moreover, since translation is based on various possible interpretations susceptible to the dominant cultural authority, both literal and metaphorical meanings are subject to reinterpretation[s], which also functions as a cultural and political filter, and consequently, a somewhat or even radically different meaning emerges. Since translation operates in a different cultural system of signification and reading is culturally conditioned and allegorized, patterns of complex acculturation that are both surprisingly labile and persistent can be discerned in translation. Thus, it is necessary to research the process of acculturation with regard to translation and tackle related questions of identity, hybridity and metamorphosis. The notion of cultural amalgamation has its source in the overcoming of cultural confinement and limitation, and in experimenting with mediation and appropriation designed to reconcile or manipulate cross-cultural differences, increasing attention is paid the cognitive, cultural, discursive, political, and historical dimensions of Translation Studies. Thus more holistic approaches to translation are in order.

## **7. Conclusion**

Translation Studies has grown exponentially since the 1960s, but admittedly not much headway has been made in tackling some of the intellectual concerns centering on the nature of the discipline, which remains inadequately analyzed and unsatisfactorily systematized. In any event, however, the development of Translation Studies in the West has rekindled interest in examining the many-faceted nature and essential parameters of the discipline in China. And in terms of cross-cultural parameters, translation means constant adjustment and displacement, as a result of which the identity of Translation Studies is bound to be a shifting one. This is also due to the growing recognition of the importance, and also, inevitability of cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary perspectives, which have made it possible to transcend traditional disciplinary and cultural frontiers. Meanwhile, it is tangibly evident that Chinese translation scholars are seeking to explore and work out various research methodologies in order to contribute to the development of Translation Studies. In addition, the process of Chinese modernization has been intertwined with translation, which has experienced some major historical transformation. Thus a Chinese perspective can contribute to sharpening and strengthening conceptualizations of translation. In the current age of globalization, increasing cross-cultural interaction has alleviated the sense of cultural deracination typically associated with translation, which has greatly boosted the country's cultural confidence. And consequently, while recycling of foreign ideas is diminishing, more original, daring research undertakings are on the horizon.

Increasingly, translation has become a hotbed of postmodern experimentation, shifting away from the traditional conception of the fixed, stable and essential nature of meaning and signification, and concentrating instead on variational possibilities. Inevitably, theoretical developments in other related disciplines are of crucial importance for conducting research in translation and for stimulating the interdisciplinary cross-fertilization that helps counter the marginal status of Translation Studies. Chinese translation scholars are prepared to experiment

with ideas and concepts developed in the West. They have shown a willingness to learn from international scholars who have different perspectives and to enrich their multicultural experiences. Such different perspectives have empowered them to explore in depth translation problems that have arisen in the Chinese cultural context. As a result, the relatively high degree of randomness in expounding translation has been combated by an increasing level of sophistication.

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