

Social Background and Translation

-- Take the Chinese Version of *A Tale of Two Cities* as an Example

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Abstract

Translation is not only an activity of language exchange, but also a channel of cultural collision. It reflects culture but is influenced by cultural background. Therefore, during the analysis of translations, it's of great significance to figure out the reason for the difference. *A Tale of Two Cities* is listed one of Charles Dickens' masterpieces, which exerted great influence. Lots of translators chose to translate it for various reasons. This paper firstly introduces the main plots, then displays the difference of the two translated versions, through which it can be found that this is the result of different social backgrounds.

Keywords

Social background; Culture; Translators; Translated versions.

1. INTRODUCTION

A Tale of Two Cities is one of Charles Dickens' masterpieces. Charles Dickens was the most popular Victorian British novelist, as well as the most popular novelist, who created some of the most iconic characters in English literature. *A Tale of Two Cities* is a long historical novel written by British writer Charles Dickens and set in the background of the French Revolution. Paris and London are connected in the story, which revolves around Dr. Man Magnet's family and St. Anthony's District, led by Defarge and his wife. In the novel, it describes how aristocrats corrupted and destroyed the people, and the deep hatred of aristocrats accumulated in the hearts of the people led to the inevitable French Revolution. The novel describes the plight of the French peasants moralized by the French aristocracy in the years preceding the Revolution, the corresponding cruelty shown by the revolutionaries to the former aristocracy in the early years of the Revolution, and the many unpleasant social parallels of London life during the same period. It follows the lives of several Rotarians through these events. The most famous were Charles Darnay and Sydney Carlton. Darnay was a former French nobleman who, in spite of his good nature, had become a cruel victim of the Revolution. Carlton, on the other hand, is a dissolute English lawyer who struggles to extricate himself from a life of suffering from a crush on Lucy Manette, Anay's wife. The novel was published as a weekly rather than as a monthly like most of his other novels. The first issue appeared in the April 30, 1859, first issue of *All the Year Round*. The last rant was on November 25th. "Two Cities" in the title refers to Paris and London.

Culture refers to the sum total of a country or nation's history, customs, traditional customs, lifestyle, literature and art, way of thinking, values, etc. Language and culture are inseparable [1]. Language has rich cultural connotations and reflects the culture that produces it. Cross-cultural language communication is often disturbed by cultural differences. Because language is very sensitive to social and cultural developments, any changes will be reflected in the language. Without a clear understanding of the development and change of social culture, we

cannot fully understand the language that reflects it. As soon as *A Tale of Two Cities* was published, many people began to translate it. Each translator's time background is different, the translation of *A Tale of Two Cities* is also very diverse. The translations are with specific purposes, such as to open the minds of the people and so on. This paper selects the two translators, who are Wei Yi and Song Zhaolin. Through comparison, it can be seen that Wei Yi and Song Zhaolin's translation is very different, which is embodied in terms of diction, structure, style and so on. Wei Yi's overall translation is classical, while his words are closer to modern ones. This is mainly because Wei Yi was born and raised in the Republic of China, while Song Zhaolin spent much of his life dealing with the post-1949 period. Therefore, it can be concluded that social background has a great influence not only on literary works, but also on their translation. In the subsequent analysis of the translation, attention should be paid to the analysis of social contexts. Society is the root of a person, and it is bound to have a profound influence on a translator and his later activities. The novel was set in the background of French Revolution, and the 'two cities' means London and Paris. The period of French Revolution is the age of turbulence, while China was in the Republican period, which was also a very turbulent time. Wei Yi translated *A Tale of Two Cities* in the purpose of providing some references. This paper chooses the translation of Wei Yi and Song Zhaolin, because Wei Yi's translation is more representative, while Song Zhaolin's translation also has its own historical background and translation purpose. Through reading essays about *A Tale of Two Cities*, a conclusion can be generated that most of the essay is about humanitarianism. Hence, this paper start from a new dimension, which compares two translated versions of the novel, aiming at exploring how social background influences translation

2. COMPARISON OF THE TRANSLATION AND TRANSLATORS

According to Xing Xianglan [2], with his superb art of vocabulary and rhetoric, Dickens created vivid characters in his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, which vividly reflected the British society and the atmosphere of The Times at that time. By using dramatic plots and the novel structure of "multiple integration", it aims to develop the narrative form of the traditional English novel into a dramatic form, and successfully develops the artistic creation means of the English novel to a mature height.

2.1. Analysis of the Translation Differences

This part mainly discusses translation differences from the perspective of diction, style and sentence structure in the Chinese version.

2.1.2 Difference in Diction

From the different versions of translation, such a conclusion can be drawn. On the one hand, Wei Yi's translation tends to be more classic and elegant, which is full of classical Chinese vocabulary. On the other hand, Song Zhaolin's translation is more modern, which appears to be more close to sentences we use today. However, being modern doesn't mean being colloquial. The words are words frequently picked up in today's world, and they're also understandable.

2.1.2 Difference in Style

It is clear that Wei Yi's translated version is close to ancient Chinese literature in style, since it consists of lots of learned words and phrases. And more importantly, many monosyllables appeared in his translated version. Song Zhaolin translated the novel into a more modern way, which is very understandable and acceptable to modern Chinese people. In Song Zhaolin's translation, he uses lots of disyllables. In terms of its part of speech, Wei Yi tends to use more verbs than Song Zhaolin does. When translating the headlines of each chapter, Wei Yi uses more verbal expressions, while Song Zhaolin chooses more noun expressions. For example, these

phrases are verbal expressions in Chinese. On the contrary, Song Zhaolin's translation of the headlines contains not only verbs but also noun expressions.

2.1.3 Difference in Structure

What's more, it's self-evident that the sentence structure in Wei Yi's translation is antithetical and neat, and the words in each antithetical sentence correspond to each other. However, Song Zhaolin didn't choose a way that is very antithetical. In fact, this may be the result of modern Chinese.

3. THE REASON FOR THE DIFFERENCES

Translation is a process of understanding and expression, involving the source language and the target language, the author, the translator and the reader. In the process of translation, translators will inevitably be in a dynamic field of activity. Translation is always one of the many social activities. It is inevitably influenced by many factors, including the understanding of the subject, the external context factors and the translation mode factors

3.1. Different Social Backgrounds

There're plenty of factor leading to their diverse translations, and social back ground is one paramount one among the factors that influence translations. From the perspective of social culture, human learning is recorded and inherited in language. When different languages transform and communicate through translation, it is to bring one language culture into another language culture, which will result in different degrees of integration, semi-integration or metamorphosis [3]. For example, there are many explanations of evolutionary thoughts in Western languages. When translators translate them into Chinese, they will enter another social and cultural context. The accuracy, appropriateness and appropriateness of translation will be related to the social and cultural context at that time.

3.1.1 Wei Yi's Background

In 1913 he himself translated Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. Wei Yi translated this novel in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, which was a representative cultural transition period in Chinese history. After 2,400 years of feudal rule, Chinese people began to come into contact with western culture in large quantities. However, due to the profound influence of feudal traditional culture and relatively conservative ideology, many people still stubbornly believe that Chinese culture should be superior to any other culture in the world. The viewpoint of "traditional Chinese values aided with modern Western ideology" is an example, and foreign culture and technology can only be accepted in the form of traditional Chinese studies. Wei Yi received traditional feudal education from an early age and lived in feudal times for most of his life, which made him a staunch defender of feudal culture. Similarly, in the 1920s, Wei Yi's readers mainly came from the social elite, and also had a strong feudal conservative thought. Facing a novel with a strong foreign culture, Wei Yi chose the translation methods of provincial translation, free translation, and rewriting, and carried out culturally filtered on the western cultural elements in the original work. From this point of view, Wei Yi's role seems to be more like a cultural mediator of an introduced foreign culture.

3.1.2 Song Zhaolin's Background

Song Zhaolin's literary translation after the Cultural Revolution has entered a irradiant period, which was an unprecedented decade of cultural stagnation from 1966 to 1976. After a long period of ideological and emotional oppression during the Cultural Revolution, people yearn for freedom and fresh ideas. The subsequent reform and opening-up has brought rich foreign literary works. Therefore, the introduction and translation of western literary works were warmly welcomed at that time. Since then, Song Zhaolin began to translate and edit works to meet the requirements of an open social environment. In his spare time, he also devoted himself

to the translation and research of foreign literature. In addition, he has been awarded the title of President of Zhejiang Translators Association for many years. Besides, he served as the director of Zhejiang Institute of Comparative Literature and Foreign Literature, which also had a great impact on the training of translation talents and academic exchanges. In 1994, he translated *A Tale of Two Cities*. In conclusion, he spent most of his life after the founding of new China.

3.1.3 Comparison of the Difference in Social Background

Since the two translators---Wei Yi and Song Zhaolin come from different social backgrounds, their translation features are also different. Indeed, Wei Yi's translation is impregnated with the flavor of the period, which underscores the competition of 'foreign' and 'domestic'. At that time, most literature translation is to help local literature catch up with foreign literature. For the purpose of surpassing foreign culture, some translators may choose to amplification or omission. Wei Yi is so typical of this dimension. Wei Yi and other collaborators for their excessive deletion of the original text. "The former Chinese translators preferred to abridge the original text. Wei Yi's translation of *A Tale of Two Cities* is only one third of the original." In fact, this may be due to that Wei Yi has his own ideas about the book.

And Song Zhaolin is more different. He emphasized the sociality, education and artistry of the text. At that time, literature is closely related to politics. Under the specific historical background, the choice of translated texts has a specific purpose and tendency. Song Zhaolin's translation can be divided into two stages. The first stage is from 1950s to 1960s. The background of this era is that the People's Republic of China was founded shortly and the translation of contemporary literature has just started. The second stage is from 1980s to 21st century, this stage is in the fourth translation climax in Chinese history (since the implementation of reform and opening up in 1980s). The improvement of political situation and the ideological liberation movement have gradually shaken the ideological shackles resulted from the Cultural Revolution. All kinds of cultural activities in China have boomed, and a large number of foreign literature of different schools have been systematically translated into Chinese, aiming at broadening people's horizons and enriching people's thoughts.

3.2. Other Factors

Of course, there are other factors influencing their translation features, like their personal literature attainment. Wei Yi had received an old-fashioned education from an educated background and was proficient in Chinese. He had also worked with Lin Shu to translate some literary works. In the long - term cooperation with Lin Shu, Wei Yi also improved his literary accomplishment. Song Zhaolin, was born in a poor family in his early years in Jinhua, Zhejiang province. When he was a child, he worked as a farmer for landlords, worked as a worker in a grocery store and worked as an apprentice in a shop to learn craft. Through his hard work, Song was admitted to a public school, went to high school to continue his studies in 1946, and then continued to receive university education. In 1950, while studying in Zhejiang Normal University (now Zhejiang University), he wrote public newsletters, essays and poems for periodicals. In 1953, Song graduated with honors from the Foreign Languages Department of Zhejiang University.

4. SUMMARY

For each translated sentence, the translator ought to be conscious of the importance of the cultural context, the true meaning of the phrase, not necessarily the literal meaning, and to convey that meaning in a way that makes sense not only in the target language but also in the target cultural and social context. There are many institutions and practices that exist in one culture but not in other cultures or societies. Deeply-rooted belief systems and even a

commitment to truth vary from culture to culture. Each of these distinct culturally-based mental entities is associated with words that have a different meaning in one language than in the other and are not repeated in other languages. What's more, translation is not only a transformation between languages, but also a direct channel for transmitting social and cultural information, which is bound to be influenced by regional culture and historical background. It is impossible for a language to exist without a specific social and cultural background.

The translation of *A Tale of Two Cities* shows differences of the specific era. In order to express the meaning of the original text properly, the translator should not only have a solid language foundation, but also be familiar with the social and cultural background of the two languages and the way of thinking of Westerners, with profound cross-cultural background. In the process of translation, we should pay more attention to the influence of various elements in the source language on the translation diction, rather than the simple interlingual shift, and attach great importance to the study of the target audience in the translated context. Translation is not only the conversion between languages, but also the communication between cultures. Translation should overcome the language barrier and cultural barrier. Only by fully understanding the cultural differences between the East and the West, making clear the true meaning of the text, considering how the cultural factors in words can be reflected in the translation, and avoiding mistranslations due to cultural factors, can the translation be the most close and natural.

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