

A Brief Analysis of the Application of Polysystem Theory in the Two Chinese Versions of *The Old Man and the Sea*

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ABSTRACT. *Based on the polysystem theory, this paper makes a comparative study of the two representative translations of *The Old Man and the Sea*, the earliest translation of Hai Guan in mainland and the translation of Huang Yuansheng, which discusses what corresponding translation strategies have been adopted by different translators in different historical and cultural contexts, and how the translator coordinates the relationship between different systems in the process of translation by combining quantitative and qualitative methods.*

KEYWORDS: *polysystem theory; translated literature; translation strategies; *The Old Man and the Sea**

1. Introduction

The Old Man and the Sea is a classic work of American novelist Ernest Hemingway, published in 1952, immediately caused a world literary sensation. In the same year, Hemingway won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature, and won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1954. Hemingway himself said: *The Old Man and the Sea* can be written so long as more than 1000 pages, the novel has every character of the village and describes how they earn a living, how to be born, educated, have children and so on.[1] But Hemingway condensed everything into an old man, a boy and a fish. Simple style with much charisma is one of the most striking features of *The old Man and the Sea*, which gives literature a multi-layered meaning. This paper will explore what the corresponding translation strategies adopted by the two different translators in different historical and cultural contexts and how the two translators coordinate the relationship between different systems.

2. Polysystem Theory

The polysystem theory was proposed by Itamar Even-Zohar in the 70s, which is based on the theory of Russian formalism, this theory breaks through the boundary of traditional linguistics translation theory and has a great influence on translation research. In his view, the phenomenon of various social symbols, that is, various forms of human communication dominated by symbols, such as language, literature, economics, politics, ideology, should be regarded as a system rather than a mixture of irrelevant elements to be fully understood and studied.[2] These social symbol systems are not single systems, but open structures made up of different components, so are polysystem, that is, made up of different systems; they intersect, partially overlap, behave differently, are interdependent and operate as an organized whole. In other words, the literary work cannot be viewed in isolation, but as a part of a literary system.[3] According to Itamar Even-zohar, the position of translated literature in literary polysystem is dynamic depending on specific circumstance. He summarized three circumstances which enable translation maintain the central position: when literature is “young“ or in the process of being established; when a literature is “peripheral“ or “weak“ or both and imports these literary types; when a literature is experiencing a “crisis’ or turning point or when there is a vacuum in the literature. [4] And Even-Zohar suggests the position of the translated literature conditions the translation strategies within the polysystem. When translation is in the central position, the translator in this condition is willing to break the home conventions. They are more willing to create a new, primary literature mode and adopt foreignization translation strategy. On the contrary, when translated literature occupies a peripheral position, translators tend to imitate the existing patterns in the literary system, that is, what we call domestication translation strategy, in the perspective of polysystem theory, domestication and foreignization are a pair of descriptive concepts, determined by specific historical and cultural conditions, There is no distinction between the correct and the wrong [5].

3. Polysystem Theory and the Two Chinese Versions of *The Old Man and the Sea*

The study of polysystem theory has opened up a new, dynamic and descriptive way to conduct translation studies, which has promoted the cultural turn of

translation research and spawned a cross-border translation research school. Under the view of polysystem theory, the two translations of *The Old Man and the Sea* are compared and analyzed from personal heroism and religious color as following.

3.1 Individual Heroism

Example: “But man is not made for defeat, “he said. “A man can be destroyed but not defeated.”I am sorry that I killed the fish though, he thought. Now the bad time is coming and I do not even have the harpoon. The dentuso is cruel and able and strong and intelligent. But I was more intelligent than he was. Perhaps not, he thought. Perhaps I was only better armed.[6]

Two translators have adopted different strategies to translate the psychological activities of the the old man and shark: Huang adopted the foreignization strategy, pursues the adequacy of translation to highlight the individualistic heroic appearance of the old man in the source text, however, Hai adopted the domestication strategy to pursue the acceptability of translation, which weakens the individualistic heroic appearance of the old man in the source text.

3.2 Religious Color

In addition to the color of individual heroism, *The Old Man and the Sea* also has a strong religious color. The book cites a number of details about the crucifixion of Christ, and the author consciously likens the old man to the incarnation of Christ, experiencing the process of being crucified two times throughout the story. To the religious description of the source text, Huang’s translation mostly adopts faithful translation strategy and tends to be foreignization, while Hai’s translation only translated half of the religious description of the source text and as for the rest he even deleted or did not translate to weaken the western religious color of the source text.

Why do the two translations differ so much in individual heroism and western religious aspects? The following is explored from the perspective of polysystem theory.

The backgrounds of the Huang’s and Hai’s translations of *The Old Man and the*

Sea was the 1950s and the beginning of 21st century respectively. In the 1950s of China, American literature is being criticized as never before including Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. And the translation of contemporary literature in European and American capitalist countries is very little. However, we strengthened the translation of literary works from some Soviet Union, Asian, African and Latin-American countries from the middle of the 1950s. According to the theory of polysystem, translated literature is hierarchical. Therefore, in the 1950s, the mainstream of translation is the promotion of "pure and healthy" theme in new Chinese translated literature. Translation poetics of proletarian spirit and way of life is in the center accordingly, in this case, which demonstrates individual heroism and western religious spirit is naturally in the marginal position [7]. In dealing with individual heroism and religious spirit, the translation of Hai conforms to the mainstream norms of that era, adopts the domestication translation strategy in translation, and pursues the acceptability. After the Cultural Revolution, Chinese cultural status became very important in the world's cultural forest. And with the implementation of China's opening up policy in the 1978, the long-closed Chinese people are eager to understand the extraterritorial and the translation activities, which shoulder the heavy responsibility of cultural exchange, are becoming increasingly prosperous. With the change of century, the world economy continues is going global integration. Nowadays, the Chinese and Western cultures are constantly communicating with each other and absorbing the heterogeneous cultural factors in this shrinking global village, and translation is no longer just a bilingual language information conversion, but also a "cultural fax", that is, in the process of translation, translators must strive to convey the meaning of source language and also retain the cultural color of the original language. According to the theory of polysystem, it is the translation which highlights the exotic culture that is in the central position within the translation literature system itself, Huang's translation is in line with the mainstream norms of this period and pursues the adequacy of translation.

4. Conclusion

The theory of polysystem leads the translation study to the road of cultural research, which takes translation and source text with the cultural, social, politics and other factors combined to open up a rather broad field of research for translation

studies. The different status of translated literature affects the translation strategy, but the different translation strategies only reflect the translation norms in different cultural contexts, and there is no right or wrong with the norms.

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