

# The Applicability of Polysystem Theory to Analyzing Modern Chinese Translated Literature

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**ABSTRACT.** *This article will deal with the applicability of Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory as a framework for analyzing modern Chinese translated literature after the end of the nineteenth century from the perspectives of selected works and the position and behavior of translated literatures. Beginning with a brief overview of translated literature in Chinese history, this article will subsequently discuss both the applicability and limitations of polysystem theory to Chinese literature. It will argue that polysystem theory has its limitations on accounting for the whole picture of modern Chinese translations, and further development is still needed to make it an adequate framework for translation research.*

**KEYWORDS:** *translation theory, Poly-system theory, Itamar Even-Zohar, Chinese translations*

## 1. Introduction

Witnessing China's 3000-year literary history, the Chinese literary polysystem is old and crystallized, self-efficient most of the time. Since the Tang Dynasty, it has occupied the primary position in the macro-polysystem of east Asia, interfering greatly on literatures in Japan, Korea and some other countries. Therefore, there had been no desire for translated literature for a long time.

But two literary vacuums occurred in Chinese modern history. The first was in 1894 when China was defeated in the first Sino-Japanese War. A strong desire to build a modern nation was generated, including an urgent need for new models from abroad. As a result, the quantity of translated novels increased dramatically, doubling the indigenous ones and exerting an influence on the latter (Chen Yugang et al. 1989:42). In this period, it can be said translated literature was primary in the Chinese literary polysystem and it stayed this way until 1949. Then it was gradually

leaving the primary position and pushed out of the polysystem during the Cultural Revolution (1966 -1976).

The second literary vacuum happened in 1976 when the Gang of Four was struck down and China began to open up. Translated literature came back for a short while, however, it never managed to return to the primary position as large numbers of indigenous works were created and filled in the vacuum very quickly. Translated literature was pushed outward again in the second half of the 1980s.

According to Even-Zohar, translated works operate as its own system in the way the target culture naturally selects works for translation (Jeremy Munday, 2016: 171), and the situation governing the polysystem is the principle of selecting the works to be translated. In other words, if a text is compatible with the new approaches of the governing force and it could serve as an innovatory role in the target culture, it should be chosen naturally (Even-Zohar,1990). In Chinese history, the selection of translated works is not completely natural but manipulated by artificial forces. In addition, in Itamar Even-Zohar's hypothesis, the position occupied by translated literature in the polysystem conditions the translation strategy (Jeremy Munday, 2016: 173). The primary position of translated literature determines an adequacy-oriented translation strategy, while the peripheral position determines an acceptability-oriented one (Even-Zohar, 1990: 50-51). Often, when the position of translated literature is primary, leading writers produce the most important translations (Jeremy Munday, 2016: 173), and they provide the target culture with new models, poetics and techniques. Nevertheless, this is not always applicable to the modern Chinese situation.

## **2. The limited applicability of polysystem theory**

### ***2.1. In selecting works translated in modern Chinese case***

With the purpose of modernizing the nation culturally, technologically and economically, a large volume of foreign literature was translated after 1985. According to polysystem theory, all kinds of literature including works on philosophy, politics, economics, law and fiction should be involved since they are compatible with the new approaches and could serve as an innovatory role in China. Nonetheless, only two genres were seen as the first priority. One was literature that has "a bearing on the current political situation in China" (Liang Qichao,1984). The other was the kind that helps in the shaping of the "new literature".

The former trend was set after Liang Qichao's appeal in 1898, as can be seen from the case of Linshu, who was one of the most renowned translators of the time and has been criticized for having spared too many efforts on second-rate pieces. He did not understand any foreign languages and had to depend on his collaborators in choosing the texts to be translated, and some works couldn't serve political use. The latter was formed after the May Fourth Movement in 1919. For the purpose of shaping the new literature, translated literature must carrying the function of bringing in not only art but also modern thoughts (Mao,1989: 66-67). Thus, many

works of Soviet writers such as Chekhov, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and works of realistic and naturalistic modern writers such as Henrik Ibsen of Norway, Emile Zola of France were introduced, while the aesthetic works of Oscar Wilde were rejected.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, a relatively relaxed atmosphere was created except for during the period of Culture Revolution. A lot of works have been translated just for entertainment since then, but some politically dangerous works, such as George Orwell's 1984 and Animal Farm, are still excluded.

### ***2.2. In the norms and behavior of translated literature in modern Chinese case***

Despite the truth that at the turn of the century, when translated literature just started to leave the periphery, pioneering translators such as Yan Fu and Lin Shu resorted to existing models of the target – culture to conform to home conventions in order to produce more acceptable works, later translators such as Lu Xun usually advocated adequacy in translation practice as translated literature had established itself in the centre of the polysystem (Chang Nam Fung, 1998: 251). It seems that it is the translations of Yan Fu and Lin Shu that have played the most influential role in modern Chinese literary and cultural polysystem, and even have “preserved by the community to become part of its historical heritage” (Even-Zohar 1990: 15). As for Lu Xun's translated works, however, “nobody bothers to read his translations any more, although his own writing is widely read everywhere and all the time” (Gao, 1989:5).

Furthermore, although the position of translated literature has gradually moved away from the centre and has never made it back again, the prevailing translational norms in China have never come close to the acceptability pole. In the past two decades, it even seems to lean towards the adequacy pole more than the acceptability pole, which can be evidenced by the exotic translation that can be found in so many works sold at weirdly high price in the market regardless of the readership, and by the scarcity of conscious attempts that leads to “jokes added in compensation for jokes lost”, as Douglas Parker has done to his English translation of Aristophanes (Lefevere, 1992: 51). This also does not apply to the hypothesis of Even-Zohar.

### **3. Possible reasons for the limited applicability of polysystem theory in modern Chinese case**

One of the possible reasons why it seems that the selected works to be translated were manipulated is that in China, there have always been some traditional assumptions that “written Chinese embodies moral and political power” (Link, 1986: 82), and a literary intellectual should take the responsibility to educate and influence others. These assumptions are embedded so deeply in Chinese culture and people's mind that they may not even notice. That's why it has been such a common scene that almost all Chinese literature, especially children's literature, should have pedagogical meaning, and a lot of Chinese translators, such as Linshu, often point

out in the preface of his works the lesson that they want to convey to the readership. Meanwhile, as China was facing a big threat to be conquered, with the emergence of all trends of thoughts, the radical leftists were eager to advance the stance of the proletariat and gain political power. Literature became a wonderful tool as a primary character in the cultural polysystem. Lu Xun, who is “generally recognized as the leader of left-wing literary writers” in the decade after 1927 (Chen Fukang, 1992: 288), contended that “all literature is propaganda” (Lu Xun, 1957). Therefore, most of the translated works had an ulterior motive and a heavy color of manipulation.

The second reason for the inapplicability of polysystem is that Yan Fu’s and Lin Shu’s works were canonized when translated literature was still peripheral. This may be attributed to the special case of dynamically changing process in China of translated literature transitioning from peripheral to central. If a translated work has had great impact on a polysystem, the quantity of readership and the time it appeared should be two of those important reasons. It is true that Yan Fu resorted to systematic adaptations in his works when translated literature was just about to leave the peripheral position in the literary polysystem: however, he could have felt free from home conventions as the vacuum in Chinese literature had begun to appear. With the intention of saving the nation, he put readership as his priority. Although he used ancient Chinese, which is not so easy for present readers, it did attract lots of readers especially upper – class intellectuals back then. Meanwhile, it takes time for translated literature to move from the periphery to the centre within a crystallized literary polysystem. One of Yan Fu’s most famous works, *Tian Yan Lun*, was first published in 1895, long before the appeal to adequacy – oriented translational norms occurred, contributing to the establishment of his position in modern Chinese translational history.

The third reason for inapplicability is the unmatched situation between the translational norms leaning to the adequacy and the peripheral position of translated literature nowadays in China. Among some other reasons, the overruling criterion of faithfulness may well be one of them. Proposed by Yan Fu, and reinforced by Lu Xun, and Mao Zedong, the most powerful chairman of the People’s Republic of China in modern Chinese history, the concept of faithfulness has dominated the theoretical field of Chinese translation for decades. It has become an authoritative status insulated from the changes in the position of translated literature (Chang, 1998: 252). Moreover, this theory seems still exerting influence on Chinese translation practice, which leads to the phenomenon that many translators are inspired to create faithful translation and reduce the conformity to Chinese conventions at the risk of losing readership.

Beyond faithfulness, there is ideology, the ultimate defining factor in modern Chinese literary polysystem. It somewhat compels Chinese translators to adopt mainstream translation strategy sometimes contrary to actual needs. This is special to China because the ideological manipulation is strict even now, as can be seen in those expurgatory movies and translated works in the mainland China.

#### 4. Conclusion

From the analysis above, the applicability of Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory is limited to analyzing the modern Chinese translated literature. The inapplicable parts are observed firstly at the restricted selection of literary works to be translated when a wider range was needed, secondly at the incomplete prediction that translated works have more profound impact when it occupies the primary position in literary polysystem, which is not true in modern China, and thirdly at the assumption of a link between acceptability-oriented translational norms and a peripheral position of translated literature in the literary polysystem without taking some special cases into account such as the present China. Some outside factors, especially ideology, may have a large influence on the literary polysystem suggesting that Even-Zohar's theory must still be augmented in order to be a universal framework of translation.

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