

# On LU Xun's Translation Activities in the 1930s Viewed Through Bourdieu's Sociological Theory

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This paper intends to explore LU Xun's translation activities in the 1930s from the perspective of Bourdieu's sociological theory. It elaborates on his text selection and his strategy choice in particular and finds out that his unique translation practice is determined by his translation habitus and the social and cultural context in his time. And the construction of his translation habitus is closely related with his life experiences, political stand, and lofty patriotism.

*Keywords:* LU Xun's translation activities, field, habitus

## Introduction

Translation, as an interlingual and cross-cultural communicative activity, is a kind of human interaction with self-evident social attributes. In other words, translation is a result and must be in the developing and evolving process of human social civilization with language tools. Thus, in recent years, the study of translation is no longer restricted to linguistic perspective and also extends to sociological level.

And it is acknowledged that a translator's activity, like that of any author, is inevitably influenced by various factors, such as society, history, culture, and politics. LU Xun, widely regarded as one of the prominent and influential Chinese writers, essayists, and translators in the early 20th century, is without exception. His translation activities are obviously closely related to Chinese historical and social environment in his time. Therefore, it is of necessity and feasibility to study LU Xun's translation activities from the perspective of sociology.

This paper intends to explore LU Xun's translation activities, as the leader of the league of left-wing writers, during the 1930s from Bourdieu's sociological theory and offer the further understanding of his translation text selection, translation strategies and methods, by which it will provide an objective view over LU Xun's contributions to the domestic and world translation theories and practices and the role of the league of left-wing writers played in special historical period in China.

## Translation Studies and Bourdieu's Sociological Theory

As is mentioned above, traditional translation studies often employ the linguistic approach, which focuses on fidelity and equivalence of translated version and source text. However, it cannot be denied that translation is a socially regulated activity, thus recently translation is studied in a social and cultural perspective, which definitely makes translation study broad and complete.

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Bourdieu's sociological theory constitutes a set of basic concepts like field, habitus, capital, and symbolic power and the first two considered the core concepts of his theory. Field is understood as "... a universe the agents and institutions that produce or disseminate art, literature or science are inserted in" (Bourdieu, 2004a, p. 20). Habitus is deemed as "... an objective foundation of regular conducts and, hence, of the regularity of conducts and, if one can foresee practice... that is so because the habitus makes the agents who possess it behave in a certain way under certain circumstances" (Bourdieu, 2004b, p. 98).

Bourdieu's sociology theory, in particular "field and habitus", provides a framework for addressing some issues of a translator's activity, even a group of translators, in a certain historical period. As for translation practice, there is a unique network involving many agents, such as the translators, the publishers, the sponsors, the clients, the critics, and so forth, which is a distinct social field, while interacting with other fields like literacy field and political field. Translator's habitus is translator's habitual thinking and regular conducts developed and formed in translation and other fields, resulting from the blending of the translator's subjectivity and the social objectivity.

### **LU Xun's Translation Activities in the 1930s From "Field and Habitus"**

As is known to all, LU Xun has multiple identities, among which the role of translator cannot be neglected. It is estimated that LU Xun translated 144 pieces of works of 110 writers from 15 countries and regions in his whole lifetime. Here, the paper attempts to focus on his translation activities during the period of the league of left-wing writers and his text selection and strategy choice will be respectively explored and discussed. The league was an organization of left-wing writers and intellectuals formed in Shanghai, China, on March 2, 1930, at the instigation of the Chinese Communist Party and the influence of LU Xun, and finally disbanded voluntarily in 1936.

#### **LU Xun's Text Selection**

The 1930s was a very special and complicated period in China. The break of Kuomintang-Communist cooperation and Kuomintang's dictatorship cast a dark shadow over the whole society and took many policies so as to manipulate and control the voices from cultural and other domains. It is universally accepted that translation is a product of history, society, and culture. At that period, it was evident that translation field interacted with political field a lot, which typically manifested itself in the translated works showing the intellectuals' strong revolt against the then government's suppression.

From 1903 to 1936, LU Xun was engaged in translating foreign literary works and the 1930s was the last stage in his translation career. During that period, LU Xun translated a lot of revolutionary literary works from other countries with his strong resolve to revolutionize the Chinese old society as a communist. And his choice and selection of translation texts and sources could demonstrate clearly his strong determination and clear political stance because he translated primarily works of Soviet-Russian literary theory and literature in the 1930s, such as *Art Theory* (written by G. Plekhanov from Russia), *Art and Critique* (Soviet revolutionist Anatoly Lunacharsky's essays and speeches), *October* (written by A. Rkobaeb from Soviet Union), *Destruction* (written by A. Fadeyev, a world known Russian novelist), and *Dead Souls* (written by world-famous Russian novelist Nikolai Gogol). Most of these selected works are classics of the socialist realism.

Obviously, LU Xun's choice of his translation objects were the result of his translation habitus formed along the way. He deliberately translated those works with an attempt to introduce the new ideas and concepts

of communism to Chinese fellows since he had witnessed the realistic problems in the society and realized the necessity of revolution to welcome a new world. And Soviet-Russian literary translation was new blood to the young, typically the left-wing youths. As a matter of fact, translation of Soviet-Russian literary works was a core part of literary translation in China during the 1930s. And LU Xun's translation habitus reflected by his reference of foreign literary works was influenced by and complied with the translation field at that time, during which there was a left-wing literary trend in the world as well as in China. And his translation products are actually the social call, showing utilitarianism and effectiveness in translation (LUO, 2013). In this respect, LU Xun's translation habitus is in accordance with the translation field of the 1930s as well as the whole social field.

### **LU Xun's Strategy Choice**

As has been discussed, translation is often seen as a political and cultural act. Translation is not just a "window opened on another world" or some such pious platitude. Rather, translation is a channel opened, often not without a certain reluctance, through which foreign influences can penetrate the native culture, challenge it and even contribute to subverting it (Lefevere, 2010, preface). In the study, the habitus is believed as the cultural matrix that guides translators in the translation field, typically their selection of literary works, their employment of translation strategies, etc.

In the initial phase of LU Xun's translation career, he used the method of free translation and liked addition and omission in translation at will. However, with the social environment's change and the further understanding of Marxism, he realized that translators should take the responsibility to bring the best from other nations and cultures without domestication. LU Xun advocated literal translation and even "hard translation" in a bid to bring about the awakening and self-enhancement of his people and to save the nation from being colonized or liquidated. Besides, he also tried to use foreignizing translation as an approach to modernize and enrich the target language (Chinese). LU Xun's employment of translation strategies intended to show the authenticity of the foreign language as well as the enlightenment and humanistic spirits embodied in those works, especially Soviet-Russian literature. In LU Xun's mind's eye, he did believe that Chinese revolution would be successful if it drew precious experience from other nations.

Just as his choice of his translation text, LU Xun's translation strategies used in his later translation practice results from his translation habitus constructed along the way. Relatively speaking, the strategies he used in translating those pieces of literary works were popped up by many left-wing writers and intellectuals because at that time translation served as a social and cultural act more than an academic and literal one and "hard translation" was seen as an important way to enlighten native fellows and enrich Chinese language. In this sense, LU Xun's translation habitus reflected by his advocate of "hard translation" does not conflict with the mainstream of translation field. However, there were another group of translators who did encourage "free translation" and criticized LU Xun's "hard translation" as "dead translation", among which it is known to all, the dispute between LU Xun and LIANG Shi-qiu on translation criteria in the early 1930s. Even though LU Xun's "hard translation" was challenged, it is rational to view LU Xun's translation strategies in the historical context and thus understand his political consciousness and cultural attitude. No doubt, LU Xun is considered the most rebellious but resolute one among the modern Chinese intellectuals endeavoring for the enlightenment of the fellowmen (WU, 2016).

### Conclusion

This sociology-based study explores LU Xun's translation activities in the 1930s and elaborates typically on his text selection and strategy choice from the perspective of "field and habitus". Translation field is a world involving all the agents and institutions that produce or disseminate translation but it functions in relation to the whole society more or less autonomously. A translator's habitus is constructed gradually through his special experiences in social and cultural context. The study finds out that LU Xun's unique translation activities are determined by his translation habitus and the restraints of social and cultural context of his time. His preference of Soviet-Russian literary works and choice of "hard translation" are closely related with the society he lives in and his political stand. A case study of LU Xun's translation activities demonstrates the dynamism of the translators, the translation field, and the whole social field in the particular historical period and helps clearly understand his role as a translator and leader of the league of left-wing writers.

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