

Study on Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's Translation Activities from a Sociological Perspective

-- Taking their English Translation *The Border Town* as an Example

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Abstract

Pierre Bourdieu's field theory provides a new perspective for translation studies to analyze the entire social relationship between the generation and circulation of translation. However, the domestic understanding of translation sociology is far from enough. *The Border Town* is a window for people to know more about the culture of Xiangxi. Therefore, there are many English translations, each with its own characteristics. However, the related research of foreign scholars mainly focuses on a single research of Bourdieu's translation sociology. In the context of the new era of world cultural exchanges and mutual learning, it is necessary to conduct translation studies of *The Border Town*. Therefore, employing three core concepts of sociologist Bourdieu: field, capital, and habitus, this paper discusses the embodiment of these three concepts in their translation activities, thus proving the importance of the combination of Chinese and Western cultures in translation.

Keywords

Sociology of Translation; Habitus; Capital; Field; Pierre Bourdieu.

1. Introduction

The Border Town is a masterpiece of the famous modern writer Mr. Shen Congwen. The work is set in the border town of the Sichuan and Hunan provinces in the 1930s as the background, and depicts a love story of the granddaughter Cui Cui and the two sons of the skipper, Tian Bao and Nuo Song. By depicting the pure love between men and women, the strong kinship between ancestors and grandchildren, and the kind interaction between neighbors, the novel highlights the beauty of mountains and rivers, the beauty of customs, and the beauty of human nature in Xiangxi. *The Border Town* is hailed as the purest novel text in the history of modern literature. It is precisely because of the special literary status and significance of this novel that many scholars at home and abroad have been studying vigorously and continuously for Shen Congwen and his novel. However, it is regrettable that the translation studies of *The Border Town* especially its English translation studies, have not attracted enough attention from scholars at home and abroad. Obviously, this situation does not conform to the current general trend of the spread of Chinese culture to the outside world, and it does not conform to the national strategic direction of "Chinese culture going abroad." In view of this, the study of the English translation of this novel is very necessary now.

Domestic research on Bourdieu's sociology in the field of translation not only started late, but also had insufficient depth and breadth of research. The research was carried out unevenly, leaving much room for research. Translation sociology, which is based on Bourdieu's field theory and its important concepts, regards translation as a social activity, and aims to study the status and role of translation activities in the overall social system. This thesis will use Yang

Xianyi and Gladys Yang's English version of *The Border Town* as an example to explore the interaction between translators and society during the translation process and its influence on the spread of Chinese culture.

2. Researches on *Bian Cheng* and its Translated Versions

The Border Town is written by Shen Congwen, and was first published in 1934. The novel is set in the Chadong of the border town of Sichuan and Hunan in the 1930s as the background, and uses beautiful strokes with both lyric poems and vignettes to portray the unique customs of the western Hunan region. Because of the aesthetic art of it, this novel has a unique status in the history of modern Chinese literature. The novel was selected as one of the top 100 Chinese novels in the 20th century, ranking second only to Lu Xun's "Scream".

Shen Congwen's masterpiece *The Border Town* (1934) has four English translations to date, which is a rare phenomenon in the history of foreign translation of modern Chinese literature. Among them, the translations of translators Ching Ti and Robert Payne, the translations of Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, and the translations of Jeffrey Kinkley are still the research hotspots of many scholars. The translation of *The Border Town*, translated by Ching Ti and Robert Payne, was published by George Allen & Unwin Publishing Company, London, England in 1947; the translation was reprinted by Columbia University Press in 1982. The next translation, *The Border Town*, was translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang. It was originally published in the English journal *Chinese Literature* in 1962. Today, the latest translation, *The Border Town*, is translated by American sinologist and translator Jin Jiefu, and published by Harper Collins Publishers in 2009. These three English translations span dozens of years, not only witnessing the course and development of English translation of modern Chinese literature, but also reflecting the important position of *The Border Town* in world literature.

Regarding the artistic style of *The Border Town*, researchers generally regard it as an idyllic pastoral entrusted with ideals of life and humane care. That is to say, this work is considered to be a temple of human nature constructed by Shen Congwen, which represents the western Hunan world of Utopia, and embodies the author's pursuit of great retreat from the world away from the hustle and bustle of the city. This idyll mood is expressed through the beautiful natural scenery of western Hunan and the simple people. The artistic vitality of *The Border Town* mainly comes from Shen Congwen's deep desire for "beautiful, healthy, natural but not inconsistent with the human form of life". He hopes to use "a life form that does not run counter to human nature" to explain love of human beings at one time". (1984) At the same time, some researchers believe that this mood is also full of sadness because it tells a love tragedy.

In character analysis, researchers take care of character images from the background of "human nature". The folk customs of the world in the town are simple, full of the beauty of human nature and the beauty of human feelings, which is reflected in the ideological behavior of the characters. The image of "Cui Cui" is even more important for critics. She is the product of Xiangxi culture, and she has a simple and traditional folk customs. "Nature is her mother and teacher, making her innocent, lively and untamed as some small wild creature. She has the gentleness of a fawn and seems not to know the meaning of cruelty, anxiety or anger." (2009) Shen Congwen uses her beauty to express the beauty of the Xiangxi world.

Comparative study of writers and texts is a means to broaden the field of modern literature research. In the past five years, there have been an average of two or three papers per year on the comparative analysis of Shen Congwen and other writers. Some of them focus on the aesthetic style of *The Border Town*, others focus on tragic love among them, and others compare and analyze the characters. But what Shen Congwen emphasized is the human nature of "containing truth in phenomena". He considers himself to be "a person who does not want to understand the truth but is always enamored by the phenomenon." He said: "When I am close

to life, I will always be the feeling of an artist, but it is never the feeling of a so-called moral gentleman."(1984)

3. Researches on Bourdieu's Theory

Pierre Bourdieu is one of the most internationally influential thinkers in contemporary France. His thoughts and writings have been widely valued in the international academic field. Since the mid-1990s, he has also attracted the attention of Chinese sociologists. It is generally believed that field theory is his basic theory and occupies the most important position in his sociological ideology. His theory has three basic concepts: "habitus", "capital" and "field". Bourdieu came up with the concept of this field, providing a framework for "relationship analysis", which involves the analysis of status and the elaboration of the multidimensional space occupied by participants. Bourdieu regards different forms of capital and capital convertibility in various fields as the core of research in this field. The concept of habitus is at the core of Bourdieu's theory of practice. Bourdieu believes that social life should be viewed as an interaction of structure, character and behavior. Through this interaction, social structures and those structures produce orientations that have a lasting effect on behavior, and these orientations constitute social structures. However, practice is not directly derived from these orientations through attitude studies, but rather from the process of improvisation. The process of improvisation is again caused by cultural orientation, personal trajectories, social interaction and competition ability. This inherent improvisation is what Bourdieu calls "habitualization." Habitus is an objective and subjective temperament system. In this way, the habitus formed is the intersection of structure and behavior, society and individuals. Bourdieu's customary concept involves the basic resource of knowledge that people acquire as members of a particular culture or subculture. Therefore, habitus is a cognitive and stimulating mechanism that embodies the impact of an individual's social environment. It provides a channel or medium through which information and resources are delivered to the action they are telling. In some cases, people must improve background resources for their habitus in order to cope with some unforeseen situations. Bourdieu's concept of capital is different from Marx's discourse and traditional economics. It includes the ability to control the future of yourself and others. Therefore, what he refers to as capital is a form of power, committed to theoretically mediating individuals and society.

In recent years, as a social practice, translation has played an increasingly important role in an international society, and researchers have also realized that traditional approaches to translation are not suitable for emerging issues. In order to comprehensively explore the complex situation of factors formed from a sociological perspective, the so-called "sociology turn" of translation studies has emerged. Translation studies have gradually shifted from analysis that was originally performed in the original text or source language to functional analysis in the context of production and acceptance. Problems, which led to a series of special social problems, were highlighted. Therefore, by the end of the 1990s, western translation scholars began to refer and apply various sociological theories to the study of translation studies. Among them, the famous French sociologist Bourdieu's theory was translation studies. Sociological theory discussed and applied most by scholars. "Field", "habitus" and "capital" are the three core concepts in Bourdieu's sociological theory, and translation researchers introduce these concepts to translation studies, which is to treat translation practice as is a method of social activity, just like any other human activity, organized and regulated by social forces. And the conceptualization of the "translation field" has become the center of Jean-Marc Gouanic's research interest. According to Bourdieu's sociological theory, he believed that the construction of this particular field of translation science should own its own structure, rules, and chips, Bourdieu did not include translation into its field theory because translations, like native texts

in the target space, belong to the same objective logic. It is far from being able to construct its own field, and this homology also exists between translators' position in the field and their specific translation methods. In addition, he believes that the translator's habit and other participants' habit are used to construct a specific field, and at the same time, it is also constructed by the field. The literary field, thus giving the original author and his work some capital. Translation studies from a sociological perspective regard translation as a social activity, studying the effects and constraints of various social factors on translation activities, and the impact of translation activities on social development.

4. Translation Analysis under the Guidance of Bourdieu's Theory

4.1. Influence of Field on Yangs' Translation of The Border Town

The novel *The Border Town* has a simple language style with a strong rustic flavor. The description of characters and the environment has left a deep impression on readers. When translators start translating, the first factor to consider is the translation of the language. Therefore, for translators, the ability to adapt to the original language is the first task, that is, the adaptation of vocabulary and syntax.

Vocabulary is generally considered to be an important factor in forming discourse style. Shen Congwen did not use gorgeous words in *The Border Town* to describe natural scenery and characters' characteristics. Instead, he used many simple and down-to-earth vocabularies to describe local customs, making the novel easy to understand. As translators, Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang tried to preserve the original language style by choosing to use the corresponding or similar words in English when translating *The Border Town*.

English and Chinese belong to two completely different language systems. Many of the differences between the two languages are reflected in the focus on metamorphosis in English and the emphasis on paradox in Chinese. Sentence structure and logic are strongly reflected in English, while Chinese is relatively more concerned with the expression of meaning. Therefore, many functional words such as conjunctions appear in sentences in English, making the sentence structure clear and complete, while Chinese functional words are used much less frequently. Based on the differences between English and Chinese, Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang made appropriate adjustments in the translation process to actively adapt to the different language environments of English and Chinese.

In order to highlight the expressions and actions of characters, Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang changed the sentence structure of the original text during translation, using non-predicate verbs, a typical English sentence structure. The translation is a product of the translator's active adaptation to the English language environment. From the above analysis, we can see that during the translation process, the translator chooses different processing methods to adapt to the target language environment, thereby making the translation more faithful to the original and more readable in style.

4.2. Influence of habitus on Yangs' Translation of The Border Town

In his analysis of habitus, Bourdieu emphasized the extreme importance of the individual's original survival experience to the formation of habitus. These experiences include childhood life experience and the impact of the first major event. Once formed, habitus has a natural tendency to protect its own identity and constancy. The early personal experiences of Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, especially his educational background, had a long-term impact on the formation and development of his translation habitus.

4.2.1. Life and Academic Experience

Yang Xianyi was born in 1915 and received a typical old Chinese education in his childhood. Under the guidance of his teacher Wei Ruzhou, he studied many Chinese classics, and learned

to write old-style poetry. Early traditional education laid the foundation of Chinese language and culture for Yang Xianyi, which enabled him to have language ability, interest in literature, and identification with Chinese culture. The translator's original survival experience steadily played a role in his life experience, forming a fixed tendency and transplanting it into the structure of translation habitus. When choosing the original, the translator tends to Chinese classic literary works with high cultural status. In the translation, he can be faithful to the original Chinese text. The deep understanding of the text and traditional culture has become the basis for translators to accurately interpret the original Chinese and ensure the fidelity of their translations, as well as the foundation of the readability of their Chinese translations. What's more important is that the early influence made the translators have a strong sense of traditional Chinese culture, and this identification marked the translator's status in the cultural field. Therefore, in translation practice, translators are quite sensitive to the status and influence of Chinese culture. Yang Xianyi entered Tianjin Xinxue College in 1928. The school was established for the British Christian Church. Almost all the teaching there is in English. In 1934, he went abroad with his British teacher. In 1936, he entered Oxford University. Yang Xianyi's early formal western education played an important role in the formation and development of his habitus. He studied English literature, learned multiple languages, and studied Western classics. Such learning experiences shaped his cognition and taste of Western literature, and laid the foundation for future selection of Western literature with high cultural status and strong thinking. As mentioned above, Yang Xianyi's early personal education experience constitutes a coherent habitus construction process. From the initial education of Chinese literature and culture, to the infiltration of western literature and culture, to the practice of literary translation, based on the accumulation of initial experience, it shaped its inclination system. Once it was initially formed, habitus was quite autonomous and has a profound impact on the practical activities of its followers.

4.2.2. Translation Activities

Yang Xianyi's translation activities are inseparable from his wife. The long-term cooperation between the two is a good story in the history of Chinese translation. Generally, the first draft is translated by Yang Xianyi, and then edited by Gladys Yang. The two also often discuss the problems in translation. The high efficiency of the work and the fruitful results are beyond expectations. The couple are married and have a high degree of identity and complementarity. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang have the same status and similar powers in the field of translation. In the practice of translation, the combination of the two achieves the ideal state where the translator is proficient in both the original language and the language culture so that it forms a common translation habitus in long-term cooperation. Gladys Yang and Yang Xianyi are the influencing factors of each other, and increasingly converge and merge into one. Their translation of *The Border Town* is a political need for "foreign propaganda", which is a translation activity led by national institutions. They must inevitably care more about the political and cultural ecology within the source language country, and will not consider the aesthetic taste and acceptance habits of the readers of the target language country. (Xie Jiangnan, Liu Hongtao, 2015: 113) Therefore, the specific background of the times, the cultural identity of the translator and the patron determine the characteristics of their translation. Due to the background of the times, when dealing with the political, military, religious and other language expressions of the "old society" in works, they often adopted a variety of translation strategies out of ideological considerations. For example, the identity of Shun Shun in translation was beautified. In the original work, when introducing Shun Shun's identity, three different titles were used: "Zhangshui Pier", "Leader Brother of Zhangshui Pier" and "Shishang". In fact, these titles indicate that Shun Shun was the late Qing local leader of the brother-in-law association, which was popular in Sichuan, Guizhou and Xiangxi in the period. But they translated the three identities into "wharf-master", which was obviously intentionally

mistranslated out of ideological considerations. As another example, the translator generalizes the "prostitute" in the original text and translates it as "Women of a special type" or "these girls"; translates "God" into "Jade Emperor"; so they technically avoid the ugly social phenomena and religious issues in the "old society".

4.3. Influence of Capital on Yangs' Translation of The Border Town

Capital is an important concept in Bourdieu's sociological theory. He pointed out: "Capital is accumulated in the form of materialization or incarnation, which is a force inscribed in the object or subject structure, and also a principle that emphasizes the inherent regularity of the social world." (Bourdieu, 1997:47) People are different in the different locations and different fields because of the differences in the capital they have. Bourdieu introduced the concept of capital in economics and divided capital into three categories: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital. Specifically, cultural capital can be divided into cultural capabilities, that is, "informal interpersonal skills, habits, attitudes, language styles, educational qualities, tastes and lifestyles". Cultural products include such as monographs, translations, and cultural systems. When the concept of cultural capital is introduced into the field of translation, it can be specifically expressed as the bilingual ability of the translator, the translator's educational experience, life experience, familiarity with related translation fields, past translation experience, and popularity of translated works. The accumulation of cultural capital is a systematic and continuous process, which is affected and restricted by specific societies, cultures and institutions. The thesis mainly talks about the accumulation of cultural capital of Gladys Yang.

4.3.1. The Accumulation of Gladys Yang's Cultural Capital

Gladys Yang was born in Beijing in 1919, until 1926 she left Beijing for Britain. In her memory, her life in Beijing was colorful. Everything from weddings and funerals, lively Chinese New Year temple fairs, kites, sedan chairs, rickshaws, etc., has deeply imprinted on her young mind. Those let her have a curiosity and affection for China and Chinese culture. When she was in middle school, she liked to read ancient Chinese poems translated into English.

A person's psychological experience in childhood will affect the behavior of his life. This is the enlightenment period of the cultural capital accumulation of her translation activities. The rapid, purposeful growth of Gladys Yang's cultural capital began when she entered Oxford University. She joined the Chinese Association due to the introduction of Chinese Professor Hughes, and in this association she met Yang Xianyi, who had been holding hands with her for nearly 60 years. Soon after she fell in love with him, she turned her study direction from French to Chinese and became the first student of Hughes. As a missionary in China, E.R. Hughes highly respected Chinese culture and Chinese classical literature. This had a positive impact on the improvement of Gladys Yang's literary accomplishment. However, it had a bearing on the accumulation of her cultural capital. Of course, it was Yang Xianyi who played the key role and even determines the role. Yang Xianyi had a wide range of interest in profound Chinese studies. She fell in love with him, and also with traditional Chinese culture. Gladys Yang was interested in practicing Chinese, and began to translate with Yang Xianyi.

Cultural products are an important part of cultural capital. An important process of accumulating cultural capital of Gladys Yang is the accumulation of cultural products, that is, cultural capital is presented in the state of materialization, mainly in the form of translations. In the 1950s, due to the accumulation of life experience in China and the experience of literary translation brought by cooperative translation activities, she gradually got rid of her status as a collaborator and translation assistant, and her solo translation activities gradually increased. By the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, the independent translation and introduction activities entered an active period. The perspective of factors such as the impact of the social environment can be divided into the initial period, growth period, stagnation period, and

prosperity period. But no matter which division method is used, the accumulation of Gladys Yang cultural products is a superimposed process. She translated a large number of literary works in different periods, which began with her love of Chinese literature and culture.

The accumulation of cultural capital is conducive to the formation of social capital, and at the same time social capital will create more cultural capital. From the beginning of translation activities in the 1930s to the beginning of the reform and opening up in the 1970s, Gladys Yang accumulated a large amount of translation experience and her translation capabilities had been widely recognized and agreed. Gladys Yang became the honorary chairman of the Hong Kong Translators Association and her social capital had become more abundant.

4.3.2. The Significance of Cultural Capital on Gladys Yang's Translation

The impact of the accumulation of cultural capital on the translation activities of Gladys Yang's Cultural capital's ability to construct actors' social practices, is constantly shaping their thoughts and practices, and internalizing these factors into actors' habits. Accumulation of her cultural capital has shaped and guided its translation practice. Her translated works have a variety of themes, including classic and modern novels, operas, narrative poems etc., but these works have common characteristics, that is, they contain rich Chinese culture. We can trace this to the influence of her cultural capital on her translation habitus, that is, she is familiar with and loves Chinese culture and is the messenger of cross-cultural communication between China and the West. Her translated works allow western readers to see the true image of China and deepen their understanding of traditional Chinese culture. The shaping of her cultural view of translation is the product of the accumulation of her cultural capital. Actors obtain socially recognized resources through the accumulation of cultural capital to create convenient conditions for their practice, as is the case with the development of the translation and translation career of Gladys Yang. In 1943 Liang Shiqiu invited her to join the "National Compilation Museum", and in 1952 the president of the Foreign Languages Press, invited her to join the newly established Foreign Languages Publishing House, all of which brought her the accumulation of cultural capital. And her relationship with the English literary magazine Chinese Literature is the product of her cultural capital accumulation. In order to disseminate new literary works from the 1940s to the early 1950s, to the Western readers, the birth of the Chinese Literature magazine, and Ye Junjian, the translator in charge of the magazine, invited the couple to participate with him because of their translation experience. Gladys Yang became one of the main translators and independently translated a large number of literary works in the magazine. Accumulation of Gladys Yang's cultural capital had made her translation career fruitful. The acceptability of works by Gladys Yang's translation to Western readers was also an important indicator of the impact of cultural capital accumulation on its translation activities. Through her translations and publications in the Chinese Literature magazine, Gladys Yang became a favorite of many readers. It was not difficult to see that the accumulation of the culture capital of Gladys Yang has affected its selection of translation materials, shaped her cultural outlook on translation and brought a stage of development for her translation career. Absolutely her translation works have also been loved by Western scholars and ordinary readers.

5. Conclusion

The sociological perspective of translation regards translation as a behavioral activity in the context of social macroeconomics, studies the impact and constraints of various social factors on translation activities, and the impact of translation activities and products. Bourdieu's sociological theory is helpful to analyze the interaction and influence of translation and other fields, as well as the relationship and role of translators and other participants in translation activities. Translation studies are no longer tied to the text itself, but as a behavioral activity

constrained by various social factors, which provides a broad space for the sociology of translation studies and expands a new perspective on translation studies.

Choosing the perspective of sociology to analyze the social nature of the subject and object of translation and the role of translation will help us to deepen our understanding of translation activities and its development rules, thereby enriching and improving the construction of a translation theory system. The publication of the English translation *The Border Town* is closely related to the couple's childhood experiences, educational background and translation habits. It is also because of the particularity of the couple's "Chinese-Western integration" that they have paid more attention to the choice of translation texts, and have contributed greatly to the spread of Chinese culture to the West.

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