Lu Xun’s Domestication and Foreignization:
Translation Strategies in early 20th century China

Abstract
This paper examines translation practices and discourse in China at the turn of the twentieth century. In a period characterized by internal turmoil and change, Chinese intellectuals had to grapple with new ideas and Western thought. Chinese translation theory became tied up in debates over translated Western writings and their relationship to a China in search of progress and modernity, leading to renewed contestation of different translation strategies. Lu Xun initially followed the predominant Chinese practice of free translation, adapting Western works for local audiences. However, he later switched to a foreignizing strategy, consciously choosing faithfulness over fluency in order to preserve even foreign grammatical and syntactic structures. Lu Xun used these alternate approaches to achieve his political and social aims of eliminating Sinocentrism. While others who Sinicized Western literature to cater to domestic linguistic and cultural values, he used a domesticating strategy to popularize foreign concepts, so as to introduce new Western ways of thinking that could spur internal reforms in a backward China. Subsequently, the mass mobilization and rise of Chinese nationalism through political and cultural movements in the late 1910s set the stage for a more radical foreignizing approach. Rather than reflecting linguistic self-colonization by a superior West, importing foreign Europeanized linguistic styles served to stimulate reexamination and reform of the limitations of Chinese language and thought. Thus, translation cannot be understood in isolation from the wider political and sociocultural framework. Different strategies play a fundamental role in shaping the national cultural discourse and dealing with an Other. Such debates were most prevalent as China sought to modernize itself at the turn of the twentieth century.

5 Keywords:
Translation; China; Domestication; Foreignization; Lu Xun;
This paper examines translation practices and discourse in China at the turn of the 20th century. From the Opium and Sino-Japanese wars to the May Fourth movement, this period – a transition from the last imperial dynasty of China to a nascent republic – was one of tumult, uncertainty and internal change. As Chinese intellectuals and the elite grappled with new ideas and Western thought, a variety of translation approaches took shape and alternately came into vogue. This presents a fascinating, lesser-known puzzle, if a more difficult one to tackle in an English-based medium: instead of the usual theoretical applications on translating Chinese literary works into English or other Western languages, the focus here will be on translation flows in the opposite direction – into Chinese. How has Chinese translation theory developed over time, and what are the underlying factors behind any shifts in norms, purposes, and ways of thinking?

Using the works of Lu Xun, a prominent Chinese writer and translator during that time, as a case study, I hope to elucidate the debates in Chinese approaches to translation in relation to Western theories, as well as situate this in the broader social and political context. Instead of merely considering the impact of Chinese translations of Western writings on the rise of Chinese nationalism – that is, translation as a passive tool, I seek to engage with translation as a dynamic act, and the reception and function of different strategies within Chinese literary history.

Despite the relatively closed nature of Qing China until the forced opening by the West, translation was far from a novel concept in Chinese history, if not always as strictly defined as the modern term. As early as the Warring States period from around 1000 BC, translating was necessary when the Zhou dynasty interacted with minority tribes (Lu 2007). Translation was also needed when conducting trade, as well as for formal diplomacy with tributary states – translators often took on multiple, overlapping roles of written translation, oral interpretation, paraphrasing, and contributing to Chinese historiography and archival records (Lung 2011). From the first century on, translation played a major role in the dissemination of classic Buddhist texts, originally written in Sanskrit,
lasting until the thirteenth century. This contributed to Buddhism becoming one of China’s major religions. (Lu 2007)

Similarly, translating activity peaked again in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with the arrival of Jesuit followed by Protestant missionaries. Apart from religious activities, these missionaries were also instrumental in introducing translated versions of seminal Western texts in science and technology, in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, physics, medicine, geography, and so on. The famous Italian missionary Matteo Ricci wrote or translated over twenty works in Chinese, including Euclid’s *Elements*, while the French missionary Nicolas Trigault did the first Chinese translation of a Western literary work – Aesop’s Fables. (Tsien 1954) Many of the scientific terms developed still remain in use today.

While Westerners were the main initiators of such translation activity (and these missionaries frequently knew classical Chinese and had close ties with the local literati and political elite), they almost always worked with a Chinese scholar in developing these translations. In what was considered “usual practice,” a text would first be orally translated by the foreigner, and the Chinese would then dictate the writing into an acceptable, more “correct” style. This two-step process was also known as 授 (to teach) and 演 (to elaborate). (Tsien 1954) Thus, a two-actor collaboration was the prevalent norm in Chinese translations. In the case of the Western missionaries, the task involved a bilingual oral interpreter, usually a foreigner, and a native Chinese speaker. In another permutation, Indian and Central Asian monks, as foreigners who did not speak Chinese, also worked with native Chinese bilingual speakers to translate Buddhist centuries in early imperial China.

Here, it is interesting to note that the act of translation or the role of a translator is still not consistently defined even in contemporary translation studies. While the conventional dictionary definition of translation holds the expectation that the translator is bilingual in the source and target language (along with the transmission of meaning and content of the original text), those we credit
do not necessarily fulfill those requirements. For instance, the work of bilingual missionaries Trigault and Ricci are recorded as “orally translated” (口译), as opposed to “recorded” (录), whereas the sutra translations are attributed to the monolingual monks instead of the bilingual Chinese interpreters. (Hung 2001)

As China found itself on the losing end after the Opium Wars as well as a humiliating defeat by Japan in the second half of the eighteenth century, translation activities saw growing government sponsorship and an upward spike in volume (Lu 2007). Realizing the weakness of the declining Qing dynasty and the nation’s backwardness, the political and intellectual elite found new urgency in accessing Western scientific knowledge, as well as understanding foreign views and actions. Increasing importance was also placed on translations in the social sciences, from economics and law to government and education. (Tsien 1954)

However, the May Fourth Period, stretching from the start of the New Culture Movement in 1917 and the May Fourth Movement in 1919 until the second Sino-Japanese war in 1937, is regarded as “the decisive period” in which Chinese translation theory entered “a distinctly modern phase,” becoming intricately tied up in debates of Chinese modernity and national identity (Chan 2001). Moreover, the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the rise of mass Chinese nationalism provided fertile ground for renewed contestation of different translation strategies among Chinese writers and intellectuals in the context of a “new” China. In particular, the focus shifted to the roles of translated Western writings and their relationship to a China in search of progress and modernity.

Lu Xun (1881-1936) occupied an important role in translation theory debates of the early twentieth century. While he was an influential and now internationally recognized Chinese writer (his works include *The True Story of Ah Q*), arguably a leading figure in modern Chinese literature, much

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1 The New Culture Movement arose from a growing disillusionment with traditional Chinese values
less attention has been paid to his contribution to the development of translation theory in China. While his views – which also shifted over time – were controversial and not always successful, they marked an important turning point.

During the late Qing dynasty, a free method of translating (ziyouyi) was standard. There were no systematic theories on the translation process. Traditional discussions tended to center on impressionistic ideas on what constituted a “good” translation, rather than the act of translating itself. Yan Fu (1854-1921), who translated several seminal works including Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* and John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, did outline three principles in his preface to a translation of T. H. Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics* in 1901: fidelity (xin), being faithful to the original meaning; fluency (da; literally ‘reaching’ or ‘achieving’), for readability in the target language; and elegance (ya), for the translation to be aesthetically pleasing. (Chan 2004) Yet even while defending the importance of fidelity, Yan admitted that it was difficult to fulfill all three ideals at once. In the same preface, he critiqued his own translation of Huxley that contained additions and deletions as he saw fit, saying that it “attempts to present [the original’s] profound thought. It does not follow the exact order of words and sentences of the original text but reorganizes and elaborates…It is more an exposition than a translation as it seeks to elaborate” (Yan 2004).

Lin Shu (1852-1924), the most prolific translator of his time with 184 translations under his name, took liberalism to the extreme with his style of what has been termed waiyi or “distorted translation” (Mao 2004) – literally “crooked translation.” Although he introduced Chinese readers to and sparked their interest in major works from Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, he also took the liberty to essentially rewrite the original texts. Most interestingly, Lin did not in fact speak any Western languages; he worked closely with various bilingual speakers in producing his translations, bringing to mind the two-person traditions of Western missionaries. The varying linguistic abilities and preparation of his collaborators no doubt
contributed to the subjective quality of his translations, as well as deletions and abridgements of the original. But more recent analyses have also noted that many of Lin’s works included significant embellishments, be it paraphrasing for the Chinese reader, vivid descriptions, or comic flourishes (Qian 2004), indicating an active role. Furthermore, Lin Shu omitted any references to Western religion or moral norms considered inappropriate for the Chinese ruling class (Xia 2009).

It was in this context that May Fourth intellectuals such as Lu Xun vigorously protested the inadequacy of such free translations. At the same time, this shift was not immediate. Although scholars tend to zero in on Lu Xun’s style of extreme literalism, I feel that it would be worthwhile to examine the evolution of his views. Indeed, the dichotomous contrast between his early and later translations bring to mind the arguments of Schleiermacher and Venuti, a useful preliminary lens to situate Chinese translation strategies in a theoretical framework.

Schleiermacher saw only two possibilities when translating: “either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader” (Schleiermacher 1938). Echoing this, Lawrence Venuti introduced the concepts of “domestication” and “foreignization” as translation strategies, invoking “the formation of cultural discourses in which the translation is produced” (Venuti 1995). Domestication entails “a labor of acculturation which domesticates the foreign text, making it intelligible and even familiar to the target-language reader, providing him or her with the narcissistic experience of recognizing his or her own culture in a cultural other” (Venuti 1992). In contrast, foreignization is “an ethnodeviant pressure on [target-language cultural] values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad” (Venuti 1995).

In 1903, Lu Xun translated two science fiction novels by Jules Verne, From the Earth to the Moon and Journey to the Centre of the Earth. During this period, he unambiguously adopted a freer,
domesticating strategy. Although Lu Xun did not know French, he translated from the versions in Japanese (which was in turn based on the English translation (顧鈞 2005)), of which he was a fluent speaker. As part of my analysis, I do a dual comparison of a back-translation of Lu Xun’s version with the English version, alongside his own translation with a back-translation into Chinese of the English manuscript (sources from (Magnusson 2008)). Admittedly, this process of multiple re-translations, on his part as well as through my discussion, introduces some limitations due to potential inaccuracies inherent the first translation, especially given the persistent inaccuracies of Verne’s translated novels (including English) today (Evans 2005). Nonetheless, the differences observed indicate significant Chinese-specific modifications on Lu Xun’s part, including further condensation.

Looking at Lu Xun’s translation of From the Earth to the Moon, his preface highlights that he cut the original 28 chapters into 14, deleting portions of the text that he felt were irrelevant and interrupted the story’s flow (顧鈞 2005). Where the first sentence of the English text simply stated ‘During the war of the Rebellion, a new and influential club was established in the city of Baltimore in the State of Maryland,’ Lu Xun used a paragraph of five sentences with explicit situational clarification of details that were likely unfamiliar to the Chinese reader: the War of the Rebellion’s significance in America, a physical description of Baltimore, and elaboration on how grand the club was (Magnusson 2008).

In addition, Lu Xun actively sought to “domesticate” the text to resemble the style of a classical Chinese novel. While Verne’s chapters varied dramatically in length, Lu Xun ensured that all the remaining chapters were of equal length (顧鈞 2005). He also rewrote chapter titles in the form of classical poetry couplets:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lu Xun’s translation</th>
<th>Back translation of Lu Xun</th>
<th>English translation</th>
<th>Back translation of English version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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In his effort to “leave the reader alone as much as possible and move the writer toward the reader” (Schleiermacher 1938), Lu Xun removed ‘foreign’ words such as ‘Barbicane’ or ‘Gun.’ Instead, he provided a descriptive plot summary using parallel, matching couplets that aligned verbs (悲 moan vs. 破 break), nouns (太平 peace vs. 寥寂 loneliness) and phrases (怀旧 chatted about old times vs. 贻书 resigned from the post). Lu Xun also added similar poetic couplets at the end of each section as a conclusion for preceding events. In a particularly blatant move, he even included a quote from a famous Chinese poet Tao Yuanming (顧鈞 2005).

Transforming a Western work into the form of a traditional Chinese novel – a domestication strategy that made the translated product more fluent and familiar to Chinese readers – was completely in line with the existing trend of free translation à la Lin Shu. However, Lu Xun subsequently wrote in a 1934 letter that “in his youth he had thought he was clever, rejecting direct translation, and upon recalling this regret was already too late.” ² When he was translating in the 1920s and 1930s, he switched to an approach of word-for-word translation, also known as 硬译 yìngyì, literally “stiff translation” or “hard translation.” This applied both to Russian literature as well as to Marxist and Leninist works on socialism and communism. Lu Xun’s faithfulness to the original

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text went down to the level of grammar and syntactic structure, preserving the sentential structure of the source language.

Clearly, the language structure of Chinese differs radically from that of Western languages. Lu Xun’s insistence on adhering to the original word order and sentence structure produced grammatically incorrect and abstruse, chaotic Chinese sentences, difficult even for his fellow scholars to parse. This certainly reflected Schleiermacher’s observation that “the more closely the translation follows the turns taken by the original, the more foreign it will seem to the reader” (Schleiermacher 1938). For example, while many Western languages use both pre-modifiers and post-modifiers to modify a headword in a noun phrase (i.e. adjectives can be placed both before and after the nouns), only pre-modifiers are possible in Chinese (Chan 2001). To echo the long modifiers otherwise considered acceptable, word-for-word translation into Chinese would result in a confusing, incoherent sentence that introduces a string of modifiers connected by the possessive 的, before the final headword can be identified by the reader. As an illustration, consider Lu Xun’s translation of the story “The Cave” by the Russian writer Evgeni Zamyatin:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lu Xun’s translation</th>
<th>冰河,猛犸,旷野.不知什么地方好象人家的夜的岩石,岩石上有着洞穴.可不知道是谁,在夜的岩石的小路上,吹着角笛,用鼻子嗅出路来,一面喷起白白的粉雪。</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Back translation of Lu Xun</td>
<td>Icy river, mammoths, waste land. I don’t know where it is, perhaps it is in someone’s house with rocks of the night’s, there are caves on those rocks. And don’t know who he is, playing a flute, sniffing his way out of the rocks of the night, meanwhile blows up white powdery snow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English translation</td>
<td>Glaciers, mammoths, wastes. <strong>Black, nocturnal cliffs, vaguely like houses; in the cliffs—caves.</strong> And there is no telling what creature trumpets <strong>at night on the rocky path among the cliffs</strong> and, sniffing the path, raises clouds of powdered snow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back translation of English version</td>
<td>冰川,猛犸,荒野.漆黑的夜晚的峭壁,模模糊看去像房屋.在这些峭壁中有洞穴.也不知道是什么样的生物在这夜里吹着小号沿着峭壁间的岩石小路,嗅着方向,掀起了雾般的粉状白雪。</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(adapted from (Magnusson 2008); bold and underlined formatting are mine)
As a bilingual Chinese speaker, I had difficulty grasping the meaning of Lu Xun’s phrases with his heavy chain use of modifiers one after another connected by the possessive 他的 (see bold and underlined phrases). It was unclear which noun was modifying which. In Magnusson’s Chinese back translation, he made the paragraph much more readable and fluent by shifting the word order to fit typical Chinese grammatical structure.

Unsurprisingly, this highly foreignized approach ignited widespread outrage and criticism from fellow writers and translators. One of his contemporaries unfavorably compared Lu Xun’s to “reading a map, and one would have to have one’s finger on it to trace the clues to the sentence structures” (Liang 2004). And Lu Xun himself was well aware of the incomprehensibility of his translations, stating that he consciously chose faithfulness over smoothness as the means of preserving the original mood and flavor (Xia 2009). Why then did Lu Xun first choose domestication before switching to a linguistically awkward foreignizing strategy that would have gone against his usual practice as a renowned literary writer?

Venuti has framed domestication and foreignization as part of cultural discourse and national identity, coming down firmly on the side of foreignizing translation as a “form of resistance” against ethnocentrism, cultural narcissism and imperialism. Citing Philip Lewis’s concept of “abusive fidelity,” Venuti argues it is critical to acknowledge the “abusive, equivocal relationship between the translation and the foreign text” and that translation “eschews a fluent strategy in order to reproduce in the translation whatever features of the foreign text abuse or resist dominant cultural values in the source language” (Venuti 1995).

The radical – almost indigestible – foreignization of Lu Xun’s translations certainly epitomizes his desire to spark domestic change and modernize Chinese language and culture, particularly in the context of the New Culture and May Fourth movements. First, Lu Xun viewed extreme literalism as the only way of preserving the “original flavor” of Western writings and hence
communicating the true Marxist sayings on socialist and communist thought (Xia 2009). Yet the age-old translation debate of faithfulness versus fluency was merely part of a broader contestation of linguistic and cultural reforms. Lu Xun lamented on the crude imprecision of the Chinese language, including the vernacular, seeing this as impeding intellectual enlightenment of the masses (Xia 2009). For him, importing foreign, Europeanized syntactical structures, even if it sounded temporarily awkward, was crucial in reforming the Chinese language, and in particular to enrich the Chinese vernacular in place of classical Chinese (Chan 2001). Lu Xun’s “stiff translation” was not a simple matter of linguistic self-colonization, but played an important role in stimulating reexamination of Chinese language and culture.

Given Lu Xun’s consistent modernization bent, was his former domestication strategy simply because of his youthful ignorance? Venuti critiques Eugene Nida’s concept of “dynamic equivalence that aims at complete naturalness of expression and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of his own culture” as an imposition of “the English-language valorization of transparent discourse on every foreign culture” (Venuti 1995). Rendering the translator invisible through domestication is a result of cultural dominance (in Venuti’s argument, the Anglo-American English-speaking world).

While late Qing translators such as Lin Shu may have sought to Sinicize Western literature in terms of domestic tastes and Chinese cultural values, Lu Xun had quite the opposite intention. Translation served as a means of popularizing foreign concepts. He believed that the lack of scientific knowledge had caused widespread ignorance and constituted the roots of China’s ‘sickness,’ and he wanted to use translation to introduce new Western ways of thinking to his countrymen and save China from continued backwardness (Magnusson 2008) (顧鈞 2005). Domesticating Jules Verne’s novels through the use of classical Chinese and familiar novel formats made the texts more
accessible and appealing to the intellectual and political elite, who would be the key driving forces of China’s modernization.

Thus, I would argue that Lu Xun’s alternate choices of domesticating and foreignizing strategies reflect not so much a desire to correct mistranslation in a philosophical sense as Venuti has emphasized, but rather were used to achieve specific political and social aims of that period. In both cases, Lu Xun sought to eliminate Sinocentrism, and the different strategies proved most useful in their different contexts. At the turn of the 20th century, gaining the direct attention of the educated elite in power was likely the most effective means of spreading new ideas. The mass mobilization and rise of Chinese nationalism through the political and cultural movements in the late 1910s plausibly set the stage for Lu Xun to propose a more radical foreignizing approach that hoped to capitalize on the rise of the vernacular.

Clearly, translation cannot be understood in isolation from the wider political and sociocultural framework. Translation – and the different strategies employed – plays a fundamental role in shaping the national literary canon, cultural discourse, and the process of dealing with a cultural or linguistic Other. Such debates and national identity crises were most prevalent as China sought to modernize itself at the turn of the twentieth century. Venuti’s concepts of domestication and foreignization tend to deemphasize the fluidity of language and culture. Beyond focusing on source-target relationship, China’s case highlights the value of a macro-perspective on translation studies that situate it in terms of other cultural, political and economic factors. As Itamar Even-Zohar has argued through his development of polysystem theory, it would perhaps be most meaningful to investigate translation and translated texts as a dynamic process interacting with and being modified by other subsystems within a heterogenous conglomerate of systems (Shuttleworth 2008). After all, translators rarely work in ideal, abstract conditions, making it even more important to consider questions on translation strategies, functions and receptions.
Bibliography


