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The Translation of *La Dame aux Camélias* and Chinese Popular Culture in the 1890s

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Abstract

Lin Shu's translation of *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas *fils* played an important role in the popular culture of his age. This study concludes that his deviations from the original text would not necessarily be factors affecting the popularity of his translation. The essay considers in detail three kinds of tension in the field of popular culture: classical versus vernacular languages, traditional versus Western, and 'elevating' versus entertaining. Through his translations, Lin Shu showed the Chinese audience that the novel could be much more than a vehicle for propaganda and education; and *La Dame aux Camélias* helped the Chinese to think about the role of Confucianism in a modernizing state. Although Lin Shu's choices concerning what to include and what to exclude in the translation reflects a part of China's response to the West, it reflects, more significantly, the translator's primary concern with bringing Western fiction into the Chinese literary tradition on Chinese terms. And that explains the popularity of his translation.

The greatest impact on modern Chinese culture and literature made by the greatest late Qing dynasty translator Lin Shu 林纾 (1852-1924) came from his translations (of which there were more than two hundred) of Western novels. Working with the collaboration of intermediaries - Lin himself could read no foreign language - he produced stylistically elegant versions of the works of a staggering number of Western writers, ranging from Dumas *fils* and Balzac to Dickens, Scott, Defoe and Swift, from Shakespeare, Homer and Tolstoy to H. Rider Haggard and Arthur Conan Doyle.

He first came to national prominence in 1899 as the translator of *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas *fils*. The bibliographical information for the book includes: Original work: *La Dame aux Camélias*; Author: Alexandre Dumas *fils*; Lin Shu's Assistant: Wang Shouchang; Translated from: French; Published: Su-yin shuwu, 1899. Wang Shouchang read and translated the French text orally and Lin Shu wrote down what he heard in his own elegant classical style. The work was an immediate success. It was Lin's best-known translation of a foreign novel, and China's first successful translation of a Western novel. It assured Lin of a place in the world of Chinese literature as one of the pioneers in the introduction of Western fiction into China.

There are two general stages in the history of translation of Western fiction in China. According to Robert Compton, 'The first stage might be called the Sinicization of Western literature. In this stage, Western fiction was looked upon as an addition to China's own tradition of fiction writing; in the Chinese translations, traditional values and attitudes prevailed' (1971: 30). The translator himself determined what and how he would translate. If problems were encountered in the process of rendering foreign ideas or concepts into Chinese, it was the foreign ideas and concepts that were changed or remoulded to suit the Chinese form.

The Chinese translator had confidence in his own judgment and ability as far as literature was concerned; he knew what was good or bad, and he knew what he wanted to do. To quote Compton again: ‘Generally speaking, this first stage is marked by the recasting and modification of Western fiction to bring it into accord with, and to make it an integral part of, the Chinese tradition of fiction’ (1971: 31).

Well before the Revolution of 1911, however, a change began to take place. As more and more people came to have a deeper understanding of the West – in particular the young people who had studied abroad – there developed in China a recognition that Western literature possessed value in itself. Many of these young people, who were able to read foreign literatures, reached the point of appreciating the true worth of Western literature. As they turned towards careers as translators, they brought this appreciation with them. Thus a second stage in the history of translation of Western fiction was attained. In contrast to the preceding stage, this stage might be called, in Compton’s words, ‘the Westernization of Chinese literature’ (1971: 32).

Lin Shu was representative of the first stage. He was not primarily concerned with the question of faithfulness. Faithfulness and accuracy become a concern of the translator only when he assumes that the original work has more value than his rendition of it. Lin seems to have had little hesitation in deviating from the original wording in the translation of *La Dame aux Camélias*, though the basic story is preserved and the Chinese version is quite readable. His prefaces made clear that he considered himself to be primarily an innovator within the bounds of traditional Chinese literature, adding new plots and stories from foreign materials. And in his free adaptation, he never lost his faith in the values of traditional Chinese literature. In fact, immediately after *La Dame aux Camélias* was published, the book started to be justified and examined in terms of the traditional political or social messages it supposedly contained. Lin Shu also strategically adapted in order to make the novel attract public attention. For example, the original title of the book *La Dame aux Camélias* does not contain the word ‘Paris’ or Yishi 遺事 (‘deeds of those now dead’), but Lin Shu added them in the translation. The changes in the title reflect conventions in Chinese literature about phrasing a title for a love story.

However, many critics have been skeptical about Lin Shu’s free translation. This study therefore examines the role his translation played in the popular culture of his age and concludes that deviations from the original text would not necessarily be factors affecting the popularity of his translation. Although Lin Shu’s free translation and, especially, his choice of what is included and what is left out reflects a part of China’s response to the West, it reflects even more the translator’s primary concern with bringing Western fiction into the Chinese literary tradition on Chinese terms. And that evidently explains the popularity of his translation. As ‘a form of human communication, translation is always already over-determined by historical contingency’ (Wang 1997: 3). Lin Shu used translations to serve emotive and ideological goals inconceivable to the original author.

I include in this study a consideration of the three types of tension in the field of popular culture: classical versus vernacular languages, traditional versus Western, and ‘elevating’ versus entertaining. All translations and back-translations from Chinese are my own. I will quote from the English translation of the original and from Lin Shu’s Chinese version.

The tension between spoken and classical Chinese

Typical of the second stage aforementioned is a growing concern about the suitability of classical Chinese for translation purposes. For a long time the spoken and literary languages in China had been turning their backs on each other. Certain late Qing translators concluded that

if the literary medium was not suitable for producing literal and exact translations of Western works, then the medium, rather than the material, would have to be transformed:

[A] certain group of translators [...] insisted that the fundamental rhetorical and grammatical construction between the Chinese and Western languages was an almost insurmountable barrier. In order to be faithful to the original, we must remodel the Chinese language in exact accord with the rhetorical texts and grammatical order of a Western language.

(Compton 1971: 183)

In the eyes of Lin Shu and most other first-stage translators, this would undoubtedly be tantamount to rebuilding one's house to suit the fancy of a foreign guest. In fact one reason for the success of Lin's translation seemed to lie in its rendition of the French text into elegant classical Chinese. Lin never seems to have been tempted to use the vernacular to gain greater accuracy. It is interesting to note that he is a pioneer of translating Western literature, but he upholds the *wen yan* 文言 ('the classical Chinese'). Since Lin knew no foreign languages, he had to be assisted by bilingual friends who orally translated into colloquial Chinese while Lin simultaneously transcribed into *wen yan* classical prose.

Zhou Zhecong comments: 'The style of Chinese prose was in some instances adjusted to utilitarian purposes. Examples were the translations of Yan Fu [严复] and Lin Shu' (qtd. in Compton 1971: 19). The more respectable classical language would raise the literary quality of their efforts and make their works more acceptable in traditional literary circles. The famous translator Xu Nianci 徐念慈 (1875-1908), writing in the early years of the twentieth century, explained the popularity of Lin Shu's translations as follows: 'the majority of readers were of the lettered class and found Lin's impeccable classical more palatable than a vernacular style' (Hanan 1981: 214).

In an essay published in 1908, entitled 'My Views on Fiction', Chueh Wo, Wo (qtd. in Lee and Nathan 1987: 381) argued that fiction was a product rather than a progenitor of society; it reflected tendencies of existing society as it combined art with life in order to meet the demands of readers. Chueh Wo presented a series of statistics as the basis of his surveys: 80% to 90% of the works published in the previous year were translations. Fiction written in classical Chinese sold better than that in vernacular Chinese because '90% of those who purchased fiction were persons from a traditional background who were later exposed to new learning' and 'those truly educated in the [new] schools who had ideas and talent and welcomed new fiction constituted no more than one percent' (qtd. in Lee and Nathan 1987: 381). Lee and Nathan thus conclude that 'The popularity of the medium takes precedence over seriousness of intention; only after the medium can reach the widest possible audience can the communicative potential of fiction be fully realized' (1987: 382).

Interestingly, Lin Shu also used colloquial languages and foreign words in the translation. Examples include 钥匙 (key), 宝石 (jewel), 别墅 (villa), 香水 (perfume), 小狗 (puppy) as well as objective and attributive clauses and even Europeanized sentence structures. Therefore the masses could also welcome Lin Shu's translation as something Western and stylish.

The tension between tradition and the West

So, does the popularity of Lin Shu's translation reflect a general embrace of the West or even make a bow in the direction of change from the West? Or were the masses drawn by the traditional elements such as the love story variety that always characterizes popular fiction?

Lin Shu was actually skeptical about the West and maintained a considerable distance from it. In fact, his basic preferences clearly drew upon Chinese far more than Western tradition. He once said in the introduction to one of his translated novels: ‘The bad customs of the people in the time of semi-civilized England are here clearly revealed under our very eyes’ (Lee ‘Lin Shu and His Translations’ 1965: 171).¹ Traditional Chinese novels normally use third person narratives while the original *La Dame aux Camélias* uses the first person, thus Lin Shu changes ‘I’ into ‘the author’ in the translation. Words such as Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday were still quite foreign to the Chinese reader at the time, thus Lin Shu used, for instance, ‘the 22nd day in February’ instead.

Yet the interest in Western fiction in Lin Shu’s time was a part of China’s response to the West. In cultural terms, the ‘new’ versus ‘old’ distinction correlated with a ‘Westernized’ versus ‘traditional’ distinction. Lin seemed eager to spread the Western currents of science, anti-superstition, women’s rights, and so on. By introducing Western cultural values through his translations, Lin Shu helped to lay the groundwork for the iconoclasm of the May Fourth period² and thus contributed to the collapse of the Confucian order he had wanted to restore.

The original novel contains various narrative techniques that are totally new to the Chinese reader, such as descriptions about natural scenes and psychological states. Lin Shu omitted some, such as where the female protagonist Marguerite Gautier lives, her room’s furnishings and furniture (though he kept the descriptions about china vases, pottery, silk carpets and quilts, which were familiar to the Chinese reader), and the auction details (which the contemporary Chinese rarely heard of). However he also kept some natural scene descriptions and interior monologues, such as when the male protagonist Armand Duval sees Marguerite when she is ill, and the landscape description after Marguerite dies.

The subsequent history of Chinese popular culture may be seen as further development of this dual legacy. There was, on the one hand, the more serious ideology of popular culture, which sought to redefine the nation in terms of the ‘people’, to carry out mass education, and to uplift the people through culture sponsored from above. This is the legacy that persisted in the May Fourth Movement and Yan’an periods³ as exemplified in the discussions of ‘proletarian literature’, ‘mass education’, and chairman Mao Zedong’s ‘Talks at the Yan’an Forum’. This ideology was accompanied by the less serious, but perhaps more pervasive, legacy of popular culture and literature as diversionary and escapist enjoyment, which was castigated by most May Fourth thinkers as ‘traditional’ or ‘traditionalistic’. This legacy is admittedly harder to assess but, in the opinion of most Chinese literary historians, led directly to the ascendancy of the ‘Mandarin Duck and Butterfly’ school of popular urban fiction.⁴ It also provided the justification for the May Fourth Movement, in which the importance of reaching and edifying

¹ Preface to *David Copperfield*, quoted in and translated by Leo Lee.

² The May Fourth Movement (1919) was the first mass movement in modern Chinese history. On May 4, about 5,000 university students in Beijing protested the Versailles Conference (April 28, 1919) awarding Japan the former German leasehold of Jiaozhou, Shandong province. Intellectuals identified the political establishment with China’s failure in the modern era, and hundreds of new periodicals published attacks on Chinese traditions, turning to foreign ideas and ideologies. The movement also popularized vernacular literature, promoted political participation by women, and educational reforms (<http://www.reference.com/browse/May+Fourth+Movement>).

³ Yan’an is a city in Shaanxi province, P. R. China. Yan’an became the centre of the Chinese Communist revolution from 1936 to 1948.

⁴ The term originated in the 1910s as a disparaging reference to classical-style love stories, usually the troubled romance of a poor scholar and a beauty. In the 1920s it was applied to all forms of popular old-style fiction, including love stories, knight-errant novels, scandal novels, detective novels and many others.

the people through serious literature was again championed with great fanfare (Lee and Nathan 1987: 388).

The failure of the Cultural Revolution and its Geming Yangban Xi 革命样板戏 ('model revolution works') showed once again that it is harder to create mass culture than the cultural designers, such as reformer Liang Qichao 梁启超, and chairman Mao Zedong admitted. In crucial respects, popular tastes seem to have changed little through decades of reform and elevation. The mass culture designed by the elite has consistently been too polemical, too idealistic, too propagandistic and too simplistic for an audience who wanted variety, excitement, and fun. 'How to design a wholesome culture for the masses was again the topic of writers' congress and official speeches. In that sense, the agenda of cultural issues for [the] twenty-first century bore a remarkable resemblance to the agenda of the late Qing' (Lee and Nathan 1987: 395).

The tension between elevation and entertainment

Prior to Lin Shu's age, fiction had generally been looked upon as a xiao dao 小道 ('minor way') at best. In his age, this traditional antipathy towards the novel was beginning to break down. Lin's translation made the novel genre a serious literary form in the eyes of Chinese readers. Coincidentally, about the same time that Lin's first translation was made, Liang Qichao and others were beginning to discuss the political and social influence which the novel had had in the West and suggested that it could perform a similar role in China. Liang advocated the use of the novel as a tool for political and educational propaganda. As seen in the 'Preface to *Oliver Twist*', Lin Shu also shared with Liang Qichao a wildly optimistic view of the power of fiction to reform society. In fact, it has been argued that the interest in the novel as a medium for political propaganda and social reform was the primary reason for the sudden appearance of both original novels and Western translations in the late Qing:

The vast amount of translation of literary works is probably motivated by the demand for political and social reforms rather than merely for entertainment. Literature as a popular medium of reading has been considered by many modern Chinese intellectuals as the best instrument for educating the great mass of people. As early as the end of the last century, translation of fiction has been suggested as a political weapon [...] It is no wonder that the great importation of Western literature has become an effective medium for advocating reform.

(Compton 1971: 19)

A. Ying 阿英 gives an account of the development of translation in China along generally similar lines:

Generally speaking, in the initial period of the translation of fiction, the objective was solely political propaganda. Therefore the reputation of the so-called Zhengzhi Xiaoshuo [政治小说 ('political novel')] was very high [...] Only later, after the simple objective of political and educational [needs was met] was there any attention to literary value. At the very end, a side road also developed with the production of a large batch of translated detective stories.

(Qtd. in Compton 1971: 20)

Sun Zhili 孙致礼 (2002) has also commented that in the late Qing dynasty, literary translation was used as a vehicle to reform society. Translators looked for the yuan shi 怨世 ('complaining'), di shi 诋世 ('castigating') and xing shi 醒世 ('alerting') possibilities, instead of literary or aesthetic values, in the original works. They naturally put a much more stress on domestication and adaptation than loyalty to the original. Methods such as rewriting and recreation were often used.

But Lin Shu went much further. Through his translations, he showed that the novel could be much more than a vehicle for propaganda and education. *La Dame aux Camélias* helped the Chinese to think about the question of the role of Confucianism in a modernizing state. For instance, it reinforced changing concepts of the role of women from the late Qing. Most of the conditions of women's life in nineteenth century China - arranged marriage, limited opportunities for education, lack of independent occupation - derived from their subordination to the family unit. With variations, this mode of social organization had held sway for over two thousand years. Now it was time for change. In traditional Chinese literature, popular romances are often of the 'scholar-meets-beauty' variety, while *La Dame aux Camélias* tells a true and holy love story that features a prostitute. Traditional Chinese popular romances usually end with happy endings, whereas *La Dame aux Camélias* portrays a realistic love story that ends tragically.

However, in late Qing woman's importance was still that of mother, and although it was felt that she should receive higher education, it should be of a kind befitting her different endowments and purpose in life. Therefore the ideas of women's role imported into China in the last years of the Qing dynasty are, on the one hand, woman as good wife and mother, her compassionate disposition complementing the active disposition of the male; on the other, woman as independent actor, mistress of her own fate, demanding to do whatever men did. Thus the goal in Lin's age was still to improve the condition of Chinese women within the framework of traditional domestic virtues.

And Lin Shu trusted his judgment in pointing out messages or morals for the reader. For instance, the original text states that Armand is not one of those who frequent brothels whereas the translation merely implies that he has not been a lover of Marguerite's. Lin Shu was very careful about anything that did not fit in with the conventions of contemporary Chinese society. The description of Marguerite as leading a voluptuous life was omitted in the translation. Many intimate details were omitted. The kissing details were kept, though Lin Shu explained in the notes that this is a typical Western way of greeting. The fact that Armand has a mistress even when seeing Marguerite was also omitted. Once Marguerite says to Armand that she might one day become his mistress, he is bound to know that she has other lovers, and yet in the translation Marguerite says that it was not reasonable to ask her be loyal to him before she meets him.

Even a decade after the popularization of Dumas' novel, contentious subjects such as arranged marriages were not touched on. The media which shaped public opinion were not daring. Early issues of *Funü zazhi* 妇女杂志 (Women's journal), a periodical founded in Shanghai in 1915, concentrated instead on such acceptable subjects as women's education or the improvement of family life. Articles covered the best age for marriage, family size, child care, hygiene, and home nursing, but rarely touched on contentious subjects. The journal *Dongfang zazhi* 东方杂志 (The Eastern Miscellany) mentioned 'free marriage' in a 1917 article, only to dismiss it: the pursuit of love would waste young people's energies on pretence, jealousy, and decadence. Even if they were allowed to mix more freely, they should strive to keep love at bay through judicious observance of Confucian morality.

The reign of Confucian morality came to an end in the 1910s. Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 attacked the blind veneration of chaste widowhood, the segregation of the sexes, and the power of parents to interfere in their children's lives, and asserted in their place the enlightened customs of Western society, in which women run their own lives and men and women could even dance together without being accused of dissipation. A decade after the popularization of *La Dame aux Camélias*, fighting against the feudal values that were debased in the novel started to take effect in China.

A further look into the novel shows it calling for a release of individual energies for the good of the nation. Chinese people did not confine the story of the female protagonist Marguerite to the triviality of women's lives, but connected her life to broader themes of national survival and the anti-imperialist struggle. Why the state deploys the category of women for political mobilization is a fascinating topic.

Lin Shu lived in a world of tremendous change, a complex, diverse, changing popular culture. Nearly every political, social and economic institution was undergoing revolutionary upheaval. Lin was not at the centre of all this change but he was influenced by and involved in most of it. Two currents continued to interact with each other throughout the first half of the twentieth century: 'the serious intellectual 'crest' ran over the less serious 'undercurrent' of 'popularized' literature - which was a commercialization and vulgarization of the very values of the 'crest' culture' (Lee and Nathan 1987: 388). This dilemma of elevation versus popularization never dies.

Critical responses

According to Chen Yu 陈瑜 (2012: 67), within three to four years of the release of Lin Shu's translation, five editions appeared. Poet Chen Yan 陈衍, literary critic Qiu Wei'ai 邱炜菱, young revolutionaries and poets Li Junmin 黎俊民 and Gao Xu 高旭 are all familiar with this book. According to Fang Hao 方豪, educator and revolutionary Ying Lianzhi 英敛之 finished the novel from cover to cover in one sitting, and Ying wrote in his diary that 'This is such a powerful and crushing tale. I never imagined Western literature can also be so exquisite and delicate' (qtd. in 方豪 1974:319). Novelist Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 also wrote in his memoir that 'we used to believe that foreigners have shallow or short-lived affections and now we know that this book is *The Story of the Stone* in a foreign land' (包天笑 1971: 171). Many famous writers of the twentieth century admitted that it was Lin Shu's translation that led them to discover Western literature. These include Lu Xun 鲁迅, Guo Moruo 郭沫若, Zhou Zuoren 周作人, Qian Zhongshu 钱钟书, Bing Xin 冰心, Zhu Ziqing 朱自清, Lu Yin 卢隐.

Differences, such as errors or deviations from the original text, would not necessarily be factors affecting the popularity of certain translations. A popular work often reinforces traditional morality, at least at some point. The average reader, unfamiliar with the original language and having no particular interest in the original work, was far more interested in a readable and interesting story. In Lin Shu's case, Western fiction was primarily a source of new materials for plots and stories, and the translator could draw on it to enrich and broaden the existing Chinese tradition of fiction. A rough parallel might be drawn between the attitudes of these translators and those of modern compilers of collections of fairy tales of other cultures for children: the plot and the story is the main thing; an exact rendering of the original version is not of primary importance. Those who might complain that a translation was a poor one on the grounds that it deviated from the original text or contained errors do not appear to have been typical of readers in the years of Lin's career or this novel at least.

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