

Identity and Diaspora: An Overview of Postcolonial Translation Studies in Chinese Mainland (1997-2024)

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Abstract

Postcolonial studies have a history of nearly half a century throughout the world, and have been applied to major issues such as Orientalism, modernity, national culture, black female criticism, race and class. In the English-speaking countries, the introduction of post-colonialism into translation studies began in the 1990s. Because of its novel theoretical perspective and strong application in translation criticism, it has begun to attract widespread attention from Chinese translation researchers. This article first combs through the development of postcolonial studies in Chinese mainland over the past three decades (1997-2024). And then, it traces the history of the combination of postcolonial theory and translation process research. I also explain the theoretical foundation of the combination of the two through the analysis of its significance. Moreover, this research summarizes the main concepts involved in postcolonial translation studies. Finally, the article further looks forward to the development trend of postcolonial translation in the post-epidemic era.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, Postcolonial translation, Chinese mainland, Review

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Introduction

The publication of Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 opened up the study of postcolonial cultural theory. In the context of globalization, postcolonial cultural theory has moved towards the field of global cultural research along with the study of literary theory. Nowadays, as the "clash of civilizations" intensifies, this reflective and critical theory has been studied for a long time because of its realistic targeting of issues such as cultural power, colonial and colonized psychology, racism, historical prejudice, and gender culture. With the gradual enrichment of postcolonial cultural criticism discourse, the meaning of "postcolonial" has been broadened since the late 1970s. Postcolonial theory texts, such as Said's *Orientalism*, have moved from the description of the self-state to the description of consequences and influences. In the expressions of literary critics, post-colonialism has been fully utilized as an analytical theory for interpreting literary works.

In this methodological space of text interpretation, researchers have summarized the "colonial discourse theory" of the analytical characteristics of critics such as Spivak and Bhabha. Arif Derek's (1999) book *Post-Revolutionary Aura* considers postcolonial cultural theory as a part of the broad cultural studies. Gilbert's (2001) book *Postcolonial Criticism*, while compiling important literature on postcolonial cultural criticism, pays attention to major issues such as Orientalism, modernity, national culture, black women's criticism, race and class, thus fully developing the rich theoretical interpretation possibilities that post-colonialism may have.

In 1990, Chinese cultural studies scholar Jingyuan Zhang introduced Said's book *Orientalism* in detail in her book *The Other and This* ("彼与此"), which opened the prelude to the research on China's postcolonial cultural theory and corresponding cultural criticism. Post-colonialism, as an inclusive theory focusing on cultural criticism, is closely related to the changes in Western cultural trends. The study of post-colonialism in China has always been a contemporary Western cultural theory trend that falls within the scope of literary theory. The introduction and interpretation of this theory in the context of Chinese academic terms has already broken away from the original multiple conceptual categories of politics, culture, society, history, and philosophy.

1 Literature Review

1.1 The historical origins of the combination of postcolonial and translation studies

In 1990, Bassnett and Lefevere proposed the cultural turn in translation studies. Eight years later, the last chapter of the book *Constructing Culture: Essays on Literary Translation*, co-edited by the two, suggested another turn -- "the translation turn in cultural studies" marking the increasing penetration and integration of translation studies and cultural studies (Bassnett & Lefevere 1998: 129). Bassnett pointed out that there are two

important trends in the era of globalization, namely the globalization of politics, economy and culture, and the anti-globalization of local culture and economy. The main common problems faced by translation studies and cultural studies are power relations and text production. That is to say, context plays a decisive role in text production and dissemination. Thus, translation studies need to draw on various methods of cultural studies, and cultural studies should not ignore the key role of translation activities in cultural interaction. Translated texts are direct evidence of cross-cultural influence and dissemination. Therefore, the translation turn in cultural studies is imperative. The vigorous development of postcolonial theory in the field of contemporary cultural studies has laid an important foundation for the formation of postcolonial translation theory.

1.2 Theoretical foundation for the integration of postcolonial and translation studies

As we all know, in 1997, Douglas Robinson's *Translation and Empire* formally proposed the term "postcolonial translation studies". Robinson's definition of "postcolonial" is divided into three different stages, the third of which is to study all cultures/societies/nations from the perspective of power relations between cultures: how the conqueror's culture conquers the conquered culture; how the conquered culture responds, adapts, resists or overcomes the pressure it faces. "Postcolonial" here refers to our view of political and cultural power relations at the end of the 20th century, spanning all human history. This stage can also be called power relations research, which takes the entire human history as the background and helps us clarify some historical and current phenomena. This has enabled postcolonial theory research to extend from the "political and regional domination" to "cultural control and counter-control", thus gaining a very broad perspective.

After Robinson, many scholars have explored postcolonial translation research, such as Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) co-edited "Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice"; Simon and St-Pierre (2000) co-edited "Transforming Terms: Translation in the Postcolonial Era"; Gentzler (2001) revised "Contemporary Translation Theory"; Tymoczko and Gentzler (2002) co-edited "Translation and Power"; and so forth. Under the perspective of postcolonial translation theory, the subjectivity of the translator has been unprecedentedly valued and promoted, which grants translators greater power. The translator can reflect his or her cultural attitude by choosing translation strategy accordingly, reveal the imperialist cultural hegemony in translation, resist the cultural invasion of imperialism, and even fight for the equal status of weak nations and cultures coexisting with strong cultures.

1.3 The significance of combining postcolonial theory with translation studies

For postcolonial translation theory, translation research should first subvert the hegemonic presuppositions contained in the traditional view of translation. Niranjana

(1992: 1) pointed out that one of the most obvious problems of the traditional translation view based on Western philosophy on concepts such as reality, representation and knowledge is that it “completely obscures the violence accompanying the construction of the colonial subject”, because “reality is considered to be something that is unquestionable and ‘out-there’, knowledge is the representation of this reality, and representation means direct access to transparent reality without mediation.” Translation studies are thus mired in terms such as “loyalty” and “betrayal” that assume a certain view of representation is unquestionable, let alone questioning the historicity of translation.

Therefore, Niranjana believes that the urgent task is to deconstruct this translation view and rewrite the potential of translation as a “strategy of resistance” to achieve the reshaping of the translation view. Chinese scholar Cai (2002: 50) believes that translation should be “reconceptualized” in the postcolonial context, that is, the concept of translation should be redefined with diversity and difference as the main theme. Spivak (2000: 198) called for “the translator must first submit to the (original) text” in the process of translating from marginal culture to central culture. Venuti (1998: 6) exposed the cultural appropriation concealed by the long-prevailing Western view of smooth translation based on “transparency”. On this basis, he proposed the concepts of “resistancy” translation and “foreignizing/minoritizing” translation, and elevated them to the level of translation ethics: “The moral stance I advocate is intended to urge people to treat language and cultural differences with more respect when engaging in translation and reading and evaluating translations.”

This kind of “difference ethics” is essentially the same as Niranjana’s “resistance strategy” and Spivak’s “sticking to the text” mentioned above, and their purpose is to “resist the global hegemony of English.” It can be seen that the dismantling of traditional translation views and translation norms by postcolonial translation theory is largely achieved by revealing and criticizing the implicit colonial discourse hegemony of the latter and advocating a differential translation view and translation ethics. In this process, the criticism of power asymmetry and the recognition of difference are intertwined, which constitutes the significance of postcolonial translation theory.

2 Methodology: An overview of the main contents of postcolonial translation studies

In essence, postcolonial translation theory shares the same theoretical demands with its parent postcolonial theory, namely, the promotion of subject power and identity, respect for differences, and the transcendence of binary oppositions. However, its starting point of translation ontology makes its attention to issues such as power, identity, difference, and hybridity more specifically directed to translation ontology propositions such as translators, translation behavior, and translation works. With this as the center, the power and difference demands of postcolonial translation theory often present an integrated

feature, that is, the demand for the power of the marginalized means highlighting the differences between them and the “center”, while the pursuit of differences means subverting the power of the “center”.

2.1 Critique of the “complicity” between Translation and Colonization

Postcolonial theory’s critical stance on the history of colonialism has led it to focus on translation mainly from the perspectives of the impact of colonialism on translation and translation studies and the role of translation in the colonial process. Robinson (1997:1) defines “postcolonial translation studies” as “the study of translation in its relation to empire”, which clearly reveals the starting point and position of postcolonial translation theory.

Bassnett & Trivedi (1999:5) point out that translation has been a one-way process over the past few centuries -- that is, a process of translation into Europe and use by Europe -- rather than an equal two-way exchange; in this process, European norms dominate the selection of texts and translation strategies, determining that only texts that cater to the needs of the target culture can be translated. Niranjana (1992: 34) believes that the postcolonial translation theory’s revelation of the “collusive” relationship between translation and colonialism is still driven by the postcolonial theory’s inherent “power” complex and its critical stance towards colonial discourse. Its intention is to deconstruct colonial discourse through a text translation strategy that highlights differences, and thereby achieve the ultimate goal of “decolonization”.

2.2 Focus on the translators’ subjectivity

Whether it is Spivak’s (2000: 405) “adherence” to the rhetorical features of “third world women’s works”, Venuti’s (1998: 13-19) use of Gothic style and archaic expressions in translating the works of Italian writer I.U. Tarchetti, or Campos’s use of strategies such as “transtextualization” and “transcreation” in translating Goethe’s Faust (Bassnett & Trivedi 1999: 96), all of them contain the premise of recognizing and admiring the translator’s subject power and role. For postcolonial translation theory, the translation strategy of centered on the source language or the target language is not the key to the problem. What is important is to “highlight the role of the translator” and even “transcend the translator’s ‘duty’” in order to achieve the goal of “confronting the old imperialist view” (Chen & Zhang 2000: 193). The emphasis on the translator’s subjectivity has enabled various translation strategies under the guidance of postcolonial translation theory to converge under the theoretical banner of postcolonial theory, which promotes cultural diversity, enhances the status of marginal cultures and subverts cultural hegemony.

2.3 The applicability of postcolonial translation studies

Hu (2005: 60) believes that postcolonial translation theory is not completely suitable for

China's cultural context. The reason is that China's situation is different from that of former colonies such as Brazil, India, and Canada (i.e., countries where postcolonial translation theory has emerged). Secondly, Zhang & Qin (2004: 115) believe that there are not many translators in China who have the ability to resist English hegemony by increasing the intensity of Chinese-English translation, and "Chinese English" has not yet gained the status of various variants of English used in Latin America and other countries. Therefore, the evaluation of translations can only be based on the norms of English.

In this regard, we need to point out the points for discussion: First, the applicability of postcolonial theory is largely not necessarily related to whether it was once a colony. Its practical significance to my country lies in its "revelation of the colonial cultural relationship between the East and the West, which will help the Chinese intellectuals, literary critics, and translators to re-understand the current context and re-position and establish Chinese cultural values on the premise of keeping a clear mind." Similarly, the main value of postcolonial translation theory to translation research in my country is that it "helps us to make a thorough revelation of translation, which has completely changed people's views on translation", rather than meeting our actual needs for decolonization; secondly, even if there are not many translators in my country who are competent in Chinese-foreign translation and the level of their translations is not high, it does not mean that our translation research cannot draw on the critical perspective and methods of postcolonial translation theory. The two cannot be confused; thirdly, the practice of opposing Chinese standards to English standards is itself a misunderstanding of postcolonial theory. It should be noted that in the postcolonial context where language and culture are becoming increasingly hybrid, it is no longer possible to have pure and absolute Chinese and English standards.

3 Findings: Postcolonial concepts mainly used in Chinese translation studies

3.1 Power (“权力”)

In the 1990s, the concept of power became central to the field of cultural studies (Gibson 2012: 14). Cultural studies and power studies have become inseparable and closely integrated. Foucault (1980: 187) cited Nietzsche's urgent question of "who is speaking" to raise the issue of power and analyze discourse in a new relational system. Foucault emphasized that discourse is a kind of practice in which the subject constructs its own world at the same time, just as the subject is guided, limited and decentralized by the rules of discourse. On the one hand, Foucault is a constructivist who believes that discourse has the "power" to construct the field of objects.

Following Foucault, French sociologist Bourdieu proposed a very influential theory on the issue of power. Bourdieu (1993: 163) used a series of unique conceptual categories,

such as field, capital, habitus, practice, doxa, etc. Bourdieu defines “field” as an independent social space with its own independent operating rules that are different from political and economic rules, its specific power relations, and its rulers and the ruled, etc. For example, Qin (2007) studied and explored Lu Xun’s translation ideas and translation activities from a postcolonial theoretical perspective, thereby revealing how Lu Xun responded to Western cultural hegemony through translation, trying to get rid of the binary opposition between the East and the West in order to achieve real dialogue and communication; Li Xiao (2008) took the English translation of “Dream of Red Mansions” as an example to explore the manifestation of cultural hegemony in literary translation; Zou Limin (2010) found from a postcolonial perspective that the imbalance of political and economic development has led to differences in status and power among different cultures, making the translation flow between strong and weak cultures present a one-way tilt, that is, in most cases, the strong culture flows to the weak culture.

3.2 The translator’s subjectivity (“译者主体性”)

Postcolonial translation theorists believe that it is impossible for translators to remain neutral. Translators are tools of power struggles, and translators themselves are also a kind of power. From the perspective of postcolonial translation theory, the subjectivity of translators has received unprecedented attention and publicity.

Postcolonial translation theory focuses on the study of various power factors that restrict the subjectivity of translators, and more importantly, it gives translators greater power. Translators can reflect their cultural attitudes by choosing their translation strategies, reveal imperialist cultural hegemony in translation, and resist imperialist cultural invasion to fight for the equal status of weak nations and cultures coexisting with strong cultures. For example, Tang (2009) explored the cultural value of Pearl Buck’s translation strategy, the ethical significance of translation, and the inspiration for current Chinese-foreign translation, pointing out that her differential translation strategy is an affirmation and promotion of the value of Chinese novels, and has important value for cross-cultural communication in the era of globalization and postcolonial context.

3.3 Cultural identity (“文化身份”)

Cultural identity involves the issue of power relations, that is, who is defining, who determines the standards, and who is described and defined, so it is also called identity politics. Regarding “cultural identity”, Hall believes that there are two different ways of thinking: the first position defines “cultural identity” as a shared culture, a collective “real self”. According to this definition, our cultural identity reflects common historical experience and shared cultural codes, which provide us as “a nation” with a stable, unchanging and continuous reference and meaning framework under the ever-changing differentiation and ups and downs of actual history. The second position believes that in addition to many common points, there are also some profound and important differences

that constitute “the real present us”. In this second sense, cultural identity is both a question of “existence” and “change”. It belongs to the past and the future as well. They are by no means eternally fixed in a certain essentialized past, but are subject to the constant “play” of history, culture and power. (Luo & Liu 2000: 209-211)

These two positions correspond to the essentialist view of identity and the non-essentialist view of identity respectively. Hall emphasizes that only from this second standpoint can we correctly understand the painful and unforgettable nature of the “colonial experience”: Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, something that is unchangingly placed outside of history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit within us that history has not marked in any fundamental way. It is not immutable. It is not a fixed source to which we can ultimately return absolutely. ... It is always constructed by memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identity is the moment of identification, the unstable point of identification or suture, which is carried out within the discourse of history and culture. It is not an essence but a positioning (ibid.: 211-212).

Post-colonialism opposes a binary, independent, essentialist view of identity and emphasizes the role of power in shaping cultural identity. For example, Wang (2016) focused on the identity reconstruction issues faced by ethnic minorities and marginalized groups in the process of globalization in the postcolonial context, and explored the hybrid identity of continuous self-recognition and self-reflection in the creation of local existentialist literature under the influence of translation; Xu (2020) believes that the multiple cultural identities of diasporic translators are different from others. Under the influence of cultural identity, diasporic translators have complex feelings towards their motherland. In their works, diasporic translators construct different images of their motherland.

3.4 Foreignizing translation (“异化翻译”)

In *The Invisibility of the Translator: A History of Translation*, Venuti proposed the important concept of “foreignizing translation”. Venuti’s “foreignizing translation” originated from Schleiermacher’s two paths of translation. Based on this, he proposed: “Translators can choose to translate by naturalization or alienation. The former is centered on nationalism, naturalizing foreign values into the target culture and inviting the original author to the country; the latter is unorthodox, showing the language and cultural differences in foreign texts and sending readers abroad.”

However, unlike Schleiermacher’s translation theory based on hermeneutics, Venuti’s translation theory is based on deconstructionism. The deconstructionist translation view emphasizes the relativity and instability of the original meaning. The translation and the original work are a continuum, and any text is an intertext. However, in Schleiermacher’s translation theory, his authorial tendency prompted him to transform the intertextual

relationship into an intersubjective relationship, psychologicalize the translation, and conceal the cultural and psychological factors of the translation (Venuti 2009: 125). Venuti believes that the strategy of alienating translation is conducive to the reconstruction of national culture and the construction of cultural identity based on alienation. At the same time, alienating translation will destroy the national cultural concept of the target language and challenge the national cultural canons and national values. It should be pointed out that there is a degree problem in the “alienation” of Venuti’s “alienating translation” (ibid.: 24).

Wang (2003: 4) pointed out that the important contribution of postcolonial theory to translation research is that it reveals that translation is the product of unequal dialogue between strong culture and weak culture in the context of power difference. However, when criticizing the hegemonic discourse of the Western world, Chinese scholars need to avoid the path of narrow nationalism. Decolonization is a complex political and cultural process, not as simple as naturalization and alienation, either this or that. Any translation will inevitably input a kind of cultural otherness into the target language culture, but the degree is different. For example, Zong (2013) observed the translation rules of immigrant literature from the hybrid perspective of domestication and alienation, and deeply examined the relationship between culture, literature and translation from the intersection of author, source text, translator and translation.

3.5 Cultural and political diaspora (“文化和政治性流散”)

Throughout modern world history, the expansion of Western imperialism is all-pervasive, causing not only the population of former colonial countries to migrate to the Western world, but also many Europeans and Americans to migrate to the Third World. Bhabha (1994: 24) believes that the various diaspora groups from developing countries preserve their own unique cultural characteristics and memories of historical trauma. They are “cultural and political diasporas”. Their diaspora experience is transformed into cultural time, which can cause the political and cultural transformation of the West. For example, Wang (2017) started from the macro level of “cultural translation”, tracing the diaspora experience and literary history of relevant Chinese American writers, revealing the interaction between the culture of their homeland and the culture of their country, “self” and “others”, “center” and “periphery” reflected in their works.

4 Conclusion

With the advent of the post-epidemic era, both the East and the West have experienced a colonization alienated by the epidemic. In the post-colonial power struggle to resolve the epidemic, identity recognition reveals the tension between colonization and decolonization, highlighting the post-colonial critical consciousness and strong concern for the world; also, diaspora embodies the logic of transcending narrow nationalism and looking at national culture with a cross-ethnic attitude. No matter what problems and challenges foreign culture brings, diaspora ultimately affirms the value of alienation.

For the new generation of translators with post-colonial consciousness, they are supposed to use hybrid strategies of alienation and naturalization in various types of diaspora literature. Besides, they should consider the “identities” among the translation of cultural industries such as news broadcasting, publishing, copyright services, sports and art, television and film, so as to fully demonstrate the subjectivity of translators in the process of constructing the third space discourse system of politics and culture between the East and the West.

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