

The Politics and Practice of Trans-Culturation: importing and translating autobiographical writings into the British literary field

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the social, cultural and institutional factors and circumstances surrounding the process of importing and translating six Chinese autobiographical writings in the British context. In parallel, it conducts a critical reading of the press reviews of these six books to map out and discuss the representations of Chinese culture and society as outcomes of the translation process (with the translation process understood in the broad sense to include the selection of the source text for translation as well as the actual translating activities).

The investment in Chinese autobiographies set in ‘Red China’ and their uptake by the UK readership have become a prominent phenomenon over the last two decades or so. This phenomenon poses several questions around the criteria on the basis of which this specific genre has been selected and imported into the British literary market and the way it is translated. In this study I use a sociologically-orientated methodological and theoretical framework that takes into account the socio-cultural contexts of translation which then features as an instance of social reproduction. In addition to the press reviews, this study uses as primary data the accounts, views and experiences of the people who have been involved in the translation process, including the literary agent and the publishers who have not received enough attention in the recent sociologically-orientated approach despite their decisive role with regard to many aspects of the translation process. My research thus examines translation from the perspectives of social agents and their interactive relationships within institutional contexts that shape the agents’ activities.

Based on semi-structured interviews with the participants who were involved in the translation process of the six autobiographies, this study focuses, firstly, on the selection and importing of six Chinese auto/biographical writings for translation and the role of the social agents involved, with particular attention given to the literary agent. Selecting and importing the originals are seen as a formative stage in translation, involving the actions of a range of social agents situated within different yet overlapping institutional contexts: namely, literary agents, publishers, translators and authors.

Secondly, this study focuses on the actual translating process, considered in the light of its interplay with the evaluation of the ‘good’ translation and the editing process, to examine the extent to which the social and professional interactions and negotiations between translators and other social agents – writers, literary agents and editors – affect the way translators translate. Then, based on a critical textual analysis of the press reviews of the six translated Chinese auto/biographical writings that appeared in the UK daily newspapers, this study examines how the reviewers represent and frame the truth-value and witness voices through the translated self-writings, and how these reviews anticipate and mediate the readers’ perceptions of Communist Chinese history and society.

My findings suggest that the power relations underpinning the struggles, competitions, negotiations and collaborations within the publishing and literary fields shape the translation process where literary agents, publishers/editors, translators and authors interact and negotiate to yield the final product for the British book market. The selection process is shown to be a decisive step in the process of translation, which to a great extent shapes the way the Chinese autobiographies have been translated and received. Translation, thus, plays a significant role in anticipating, (re)constructing and reshaping the (existing) representations of Contemporary Chinese culture and society.

KEYWORDS: autobiographical writings, book market, editors, importing, literary agent, publishers, press reviewers, representations, social agents, socio-cultural contexts, translating, translation process, translators

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