

# On Causes of the Phenomenon of Oscar Wilde's Translation Into China Based on Poly-System Theories

WANG Lin

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Based on a theoretical framework adapted from the theories of Itamar Even-Zohar, this paper puts the translation of Oscar Wilde's works into the dynamic historical context of the Chinese cultural poly-system and attempts to explore which factors prompted Oscar Wilde's works to be first introduced and translated into China.

*Keywords:* Oscar Wilde, literary translation, poly-system theories

The occurrence of any cultural phenomenon cannot be isolated from the environment of the era. The origin of the phenomenon of Wilde's introduction and translation in China is closely related to China's transition from the center to the periphery in the multicultural system of the world in the early 20th century, and it also has great relevance to China's background of the May 4th New Literature Movement. Evan Zohar says that "when a literature is still young, or in a marginal or weak position, or there is a crisis or a vacuum, translated literature will occupy a central position in it" (Even Zohar, 1990, p. 46). The introduction and translation of Wilde's works into China at the beginning of the 20th century is the result of misreading, romanticizing, and idealizing Wilde's view of literature and art. Based on misinterpretation, the Chinese May 4th pioneers advocated Oscar Wilde, holding the original intention to embrace social reform, to make literary revolution and to enlighten public opinion. The introduction and translation of Oscar Wilde in China's early 20th century is also driven by the impact of western multicultural thoughts abroad and the rise of the new cultural Enlightenment domestically.

## The Promotion of Western Pluralistic Cultural Thoughts

According to Evan Zohar,

When a cultural system is in a weak position in the world cultural system, or it is considered to be in a weak position, it will accept heterogeneous things; If not, it won't; In feudal times, Chinese culture was a strong culture, so it called itself "China" and called the surrounding nations "Yidi". Most of the time, it did not accept different things. At the end of the Qing Dynasty, when the foreign powers invaded, people first realized the defects of Chinese culture and then began to accept the heterogeneous things. (Zhang, 2004, p. 47)

For thousands of years, with its long history and profound cultural deposits, China has been at the center of world culture and exerted a profound influence on neighboring countries and even the whole world. The self-sufficiency and richness of Chinese culture have contributed to the central position of Chinese culture in the multi-cultural system of the world, and have also made China on the edge of inactivity in the multi-cultural

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WANG Lin, Doctor's degree, associate professor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

system of the world translation. It was not until the 17th century that China's state of isolation and its lack of cultural exchange began to change, due to the western countries' rapid development in technology, culture, and productivity. Reluctantly, Chinese began to know and learn about preachers as well as western culture. Especially in 1840 after the Opium War, China was forced to open its door to the outside world and western cultures mushroomed into China. But then the translation literature was dominated by natural science works. After the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, Chinese people realized the value of political and humanistic thoughts and began to translate and introduce western literary works. Some of the Chinese traditional culture and literary views began to be gradually abandoned. Consequently, Chinese multicultural system gradually left the center of the multicultural system of the world and was at the edge of cultural powers. A new multicultural system of the world was formed. However, China's own multicultural system was still stable, and the dominant class was not aware of China's own cultural crisis, so the translation of foreign literary works was not very common at the end of the 19th century.

By the end of the Qing Dynasty, the weakness of Chinese culture was becoming more and more prominent. A variety of literary and art ideological trends, which had been diachronic in evolution since the Renaissance, had flooded into China synchronously, causing a shock and an overall reform of Chinese literary ideas. And then Chinese multicultural system was still on the edge of the world's pluralistic system. Translated literature has impacted Chinese traditional cultural view and become an important strategy and means of Chinese literary revolution and social reform. Liang Qichao, Yan Fu, Lin Shu, and other modern Chinese translators introduced and translated a large number of western literary works in classical Chinese, for the purpose of enriching and enlightening Chinese people. Lin Shu alone "translated more than 180 kinds of Western novels in his lifetime, totaling 10 million words" (Chen, 2000, p. 121). Lin Shu influenced a large number of Chinese writers such as Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, Guo Moruo, Bing Xin, Mao Dun, Hu Shi, et al. Lin Shu cultivated the soil for the introduction and translation of Oscar Wilde into China, and also opened the preface of the Chinese New Culture Movement, which aimed to reshape and change the society by literature. On March 2, 1909, Lu Xun translated Oscar Wilde's fairy tale *The Prince of Happiness*. And rapidly the introduction and translation of Oscar Wilde's works upsurged in China. With the collapse of the political ideology center of the Qing government and the complete marginalization of China's literary system, a large scale of foreign translated literature flooded into China.

### **Enlightenment of Chinese New Culture and Science**

The origin of Wilde's translation in China is fundamentally driven by the enlightenment of Chinese new culture and science. According to Evan Zohar's polysystem theory, there was a literary vacuum in the Chinese literature system during the May 4th Movement period. The pioneers of the May 4th New Culture turned their eyes to foreign literature and translated various western literary and art ideological trends and schools with great enthusiasm. Translation was no less important than creation and was like the means by which advocates could achieve their goal, their own new literature.

The introduction and translation of Wilde in China benefited both from the misreading of him as a master of the New Romantic literature by the pioneers of the May 4th Movement and from the promotion of Wilde as the greatest writer in Britain. The unique spirit of resistance in western romanticism was highly advocated because it corresponded to the spirit of the May 4th New Literature, which was against feudalism, against tradition and sought for individual liberation.

The introduction and translation boom of Oscar Wilde's works was quickly spread in China. Wilde's whole works were almost translated and published in China, and even with more than one edition. In a short time, the introduction and translation of Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* were on all over the pages of periodicals. And many of Wilde's plays were adapted onto Chinese stages. Even though Wilde got very popular soon in China, he was not so well-known by people. When all kinds of literary and artistic trends flooded into China, some people advocated him as a romanticist, some people loved him as a modernist, and even some people introduced him as one of the most famous European naturalistic literary masters in the translator's preface of *An Ideal Husband*.

### **The Impetus of Wilde's Popularity in Japan and Europe**

Wilde's popularity in Japan and Europe in the early 20th century was a powerful impetus for Wilde's works to be introduced and translated into China by Chinese new literature advocates of the May 4th Movement. The proletarian literature of China and Japan happened at the same time and had global simultaneity. "Japan, more than any other country, played a dual role in the modernization of Chinese literature, both as an enlightened teacher and as a middleman for importing Western literature" (Liu, 2010, p. 154). At the beginning of the 20th century, aestheticism was just emerging and very popular in Japan. Wilde was quite famous in Japan, and his aestheticism was greatly exaggerated and publicized. The wind of aestheticism influenced a group of aspiring young Chinese who were studying in Japan at that time, which built a bridge for Wilde's translation in China. Lu Xun, Xia Yan, Zheng Boqi, and other pioneers of the May 4th New Culture Movement, who had studied in Japan, were the first to know about Wilde and his aestheticism through the western literary works translated into Japanese. Most of the interpretations of the new romanticism by the new writers in the May 4th Movement were influenced by the relevant treatises of the Japanese scholars to some degree.

Robert Roth, the conservator of Wilde's manuscripts, edited and abridged the manuscript in his possession and had this abridgment issued in 1905 under the title *De Profundis*, which Wilde completed in prison. Wilde's popularity in western countries began to increase gradually. In the 1920s, the focus of European scholars on Wilde changed from the entanglement with his homosexual love and aesthetic decadence, to the sensitivity and positiveness of Wilde's political and social analysis. Scholars believed that Wilde not only peeped into the malpractices of Victorian England, but also exposed the hypocrisy of capitalism, imperialism, and the nature of war in the whole world. Wilde fully analyzed the political nature of social structure from the perspective of the logic of capital, which not only showed the luxurious lifestyle of the British aristocratic upper class, but also ridiculed and criticized the imperialist world structure and the naked commodity exchange relationship between people driven by capital. Soon, in Europe, and even the world, translation of Wilde's works gained great popularity. Every year there were at least 10 translations of Wilde's works in Europe. Comments on Wilde's life also continued to be published; even Wilde's homosexuality which destroyed his reputation and caused his imprisonment has become a hot topic of European countries with great relish. *Salome* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in particular, were republished and widely circulated because of their homosexual overtones.

### **The Impact of Individual Freedom and Literary Revolution**

Besides anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism, the new literature of the May 4th Movement advocated individualism. Freedom and democracy became the core of the new culture movement. The pursuit of freedom

and equality, and the resistance against the feudal autocracy and the traditional ethics became the most fashionable slogan of young people. Individualism gradually became the pillar of Chinese romantic literary ideological trend. Wilde's style of behavior produced a great influence on Chinese people who were eager to break through the bondage of feudal ethics and morals. Wilde and his works were in line with the pursuit of Chinese new literature. Human in May 4th period was endowed with the understanding of human in the western Renaissance period, became the synthesis of rationality and irrationality, spirit and flesh, and gradually occupied the centre of literary value orientation. Wilde's works are full of conflicts between soul and flesh, good and evil, reason and emotion, morality and desire in human's deep heart, and they reveal the natural desire and true nature of human oppressed by civilization. Furthermore, Wilde's exaggerated eye-catching dress, artistic lifestyle, and his view on art and literature all reveal his pursuit and practice of individual freedom and stimulated pioneers' desire and enthusiasm for humanism.

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