Two Turns in Translation Studies

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It goes without saying that, in the history of translation studies, the cultural turn has closely connected with two outstanding names: Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere when they noted:

Once upon a time, the questions that were always being asked were “How can translation be taught?” and “How can translation be studied?” Those who regarded themselves as translators were often contemptuous of any attempts to teach translation, whilst those who claimed to teach often did not translate, and so had to resort to the old evaluative method of setting one translation alongside another and examining both in a formalist vacuum. Now, the questions have changed. The object of study has been redefined; what is studied is the text embedded in its net work of both source and target cultural signs and in this way Translation Studies has been able to utilize the linguistic approach and move out beyond it. (Bassnett and Lefevere, 1990[1])

The term “cultural turn” has been in circulation since then. As one of the founder of the theory, Bassnett has made remarkable and irreplaceable contributions to this milestone as follows:

First, the theory marked the completely new angle in translation studies compared with the linguistic-oriented approach. According to her, all the elements of translation should finally turn to cultural level in order to reach the cultural equivalence in the translation process.
Secondly, she stresses a great deal concerning the link between translation studies and other fields. To her, they are dependent to each other. Without the latter, the former cannot be developed soundly.

Thirdly, she is above the disputes and debates over the nature of translation. Unlike other experts and professors such as Peter Newmark and others, she advocates a very pragmatic and down-to-earth manner in dealing with this complicated topic.

Fourthly, she holds that criteria of translation largely depend on cultures and readers. Cultural involvement is particularly important in translation criticism.

Fifthly, Bassnett uses the functional approach in dealing with and provides the new angle of intranslatability in translation studies.

Sixthly, because Bassnett covers so many research fields, she has reached the height with no parallel. According to some experts, she has put translation studies into an even broader sense, thanks to her versatile knowledge.

Last but not least, she especially emphasizes the status of translator in the process. As a result, translator becomes the center and focus of the translation studies.

There is no doubt that the cultural turn in translation has been considered as a remarkable jump in the history of translation studies. There has been enduring influence even today. Its everlasting impact can be expressed in the following aspects:

1. The cultural turn in the translation studies can be reasonably and logically regarded as the panorama of the cultural school in translation studies headed by Bassnett, Zohar, Venuti and so on. That is the most important chapter as far as the translation studies is concerned. The cultural turn in translation studies is without exaggeration a symbol of the whole movement. The same thing is equally true of the story that the theory of cultural turn has been established on a basis of other relevant theories such as Zohar’s and Toury’s.

2. Bassnett and other scholars have made tremendous contributions to lifting the status of translation as well as translation studies. They have expressed in their books and articles the value and importance of translation from social and cultural points of view to make sure that position can be ensured as it should be.

3. It is widely agreed that the theory of cultural turn has been proved to be the turning point. Since then, the whole scene of translation studies has been changed dramatically. It’s quite safe to say without that chapter, the following story would
not have been what it is today. Almost all the latest developments have been connected with that part in one way or another. As time goes by, the strong influence will be even greater with no surprise at all.

With the strong movement, globalization now has become one of the hottest terms frequently used in every corner of the world. While economic globalization is under discussion, people are interested in so many different cultures existing in the world. The vast majority of people believe that different cultures should coexist, and more importantly they should be exchanged among them. That’s why cultural studies have become so dynamic and urgent in the context of globalization. Correspondingly, translation is playing such an important role. Because of that, some scholars think it is time to advocate another turn, namely translation turn in cultural studies.

It might be correct to assume that translation turn is a continuity or another side of the cultural turn which happened and developed last century. But if we examine this more carefully, we’ll easily find out that the second one is not just the repetition or copy of the first one from the new perspective. More correctly and scientifically, it is a new forward in the new century largely because of the globalization.

1. It is globalization that has fastened the cultural studies as well as translation studies in the new era. Globalization, being a double-edged sword, has brought human beings a number of changes, one of which is our attitude toward culture. There is no denying that culture is different from economy in countless aspects. With the world being more and more like a “global village,” the cultures, on the other hand, are becoming more and more diverse and colorful. What can we do in coping with that? Which measures need to be taken? How do we plan to encounter opportunities as well as challenges? Those questions must be answered. Hence the boom of cultural studies logically. So translation turn in cultural studies is a must rather than a task.

2. In theory, translation turn is a further development of cultural turn. Since cultural turn is still working and functioning now, they two will coexist right now and it will remain so for a long time in the future. As cultural turn brought a revolutionary change last century, the new turn will establish another platform for cultural and translation studies. Translation turn now is the most fashionable scene in translation studies.

3. Like other breakthrough in translation studies, translation turn will be another revolutionary jump in the 21st century. It will definitely enhance the translation as well as cultural studies. Specifically, the whole story will be divided into three parts:
(1) Politically, it will strengthen the dialogs and exchange between different cultures since translation has become a fundamental factor to serve a bridge. If that can be done successfully, conflicts even wars arising from different cultures can be effectively avoided. Huntington’s theory will disappear gradually and the world will be politically safer.

(2) Economically, it will propel the economy to a new level that can benefit the whole world in which the gap between the rich and the poor is getting wider and wider, population is growing faster and faster, and sustainable development is more and more needed.

(3) Culturally, the world will become more and more colorful and attractive and the globe can be more and more ideal for survival and development for mankind. So it is believed, in general, that 21st century will be the one for culture. The same is true of translation. Tomorrow, the world will be better for each individual human being.

The translation turn is especially important and significant for Chinese culture in terms of its spread and dialog with other cultures. Because of cultural studies and translation studies in particular, Chinese culture has been put at the same level and in the same background, enjoying the equal rights for talks and debates with different cultural circles. Cultural studies and translation studies have been put together so closely that Chinese culture and translation studies in China will be integrated into the global system more quickly and easily. In this regard, three things can be dealt with:

1. Chinese culture can be effectively and swiftly available in other parts of the world, simply because cultural exchange is nothing but a kind of interaction. There will be more space for Chinese scholars to discuss the relevant issues with foreigners in an equal position. There will be more voices and echoes from the Chinese side. As a result, Chinese culture will be stronger and stronger, and more and more people will learn from it.

2. Translation studies can be linked to the international level and sorting as well as analysis of Chinese translation studies can be done earlier and faster. The distance will be shortened. Translation studies as a discipline will hopefully be established as soon as possible. Chinese scholars can work together with foreign peers in the same framework. If that is the case, translation studies in China will be put into the position it is entitled.
3. If it is proper to state that cultural turn in translation studies has stimulated the research and development to have made the subject what it is today, it will be equally proper to predict that, with the arrival of the second turn, Chinese cultural studies and translation studies will be driven to the front position and will contribute even more to the whole world. In this long even painful process, we’ll lose a lot, we’ll get much more. That’s our promise.

Taking advantage of translation turn to foster the faster development of Chinese cultural and translation studies is indeed an urgent task for all the people in that circle. Follow it, or we’ll die. Three concrete steps are needed regarding Chinese culture:

1. Measures should be taken to sort out and translate ancient Chinese classical book, such as “Four Books.” This project cannot be finished at random. Instead, it should be done under the guidance of organization made up of a mixed bag of readers, scholars and readers. Specific schedule and timetable must be workable. It must be the case that Chinese scholars should be armed with tradition and culture while spreading it to the western world.

2. A strong sense of urgency is highly necessary to integrate the concept of Chinese culture. Scholars must be familiar with the terms of western culture. Their knowledge needs to be modernized if they want to be in a position to have dialogues with western colleagues. Terms like gender, postcolonialism, deconstruction should be a must for all the people involved.

3. Chinese scholars are encouraged to digest both Chinese culture and western one to interpret the Chinese culture in the context of modern age. It is the modernization of the Chinese culture.

It will be a very long, painful period of time given the fact that high price must be paid in the integration with international format. It’s similar to the situation which D.H. Lawrence mentioned when he talked about the American Literature:

The Leather stocking novels...go backwards, from old age to golden youth. That’s the true myth of America. She starts old, old wrinkled and writhing in an old skin. And there is a gradual slaughing of the old skin, towards a new youth. It is the myth of America. [31]

But that’s only one side of the story. The other side is that we’ll certainly get more than we lose. If we can succeed, Chinese culture will make more contributions to
world peace and stability to reduce the risky and dangerous factors. Because some scholars and professors think that the 21st century will be the one with civilization conflicts stemming from different civilizations and cultures. Huntington, perhaps, is the typical representative. In "The Coming Clash of Civilizations, or, the West against the Rest," he writes:

Civilization identity will be increasingly important and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interaction among seven or eight major civilizations. These include the Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and possibly African civilizations. The most important and bloody conflicts will occur along the borders separating these cultures. The fault lines between civilization will be the battle lines of the future.\[14\]

Then he continued to give his reasons by saying:

First, differences among civilizations are basic, involving history, language, culture, tradition and, most importantly, religion. Different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and men, the citizen and the state, parents and children, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear.

Second, the world is becoming smaller. These interactions between peoples of different civilizations are increasing. These interactions intensify civilization consciousness: awareness of differences between civilizations and commonalities within civilizations.

Third, economic and social changes are separating people from long-standing social identities. In much of the world, religion has moved in to fill this gap, often in the form of movements labeled fundamentalist. Such movements are found in Western Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. The "unsecularization of the world," the social (philosopher) George Weigel has remarked, "is one of the dominant social facts of life in the late twentieth century."

Fourth, the growth of civilization consciousness is enhanced by the fact that, at the moment that the West is at the peak of its power, a return-to-the roots phenomenon is occurring among non-Western civilizations—the "Asianization" in Japan, the end of the Nehru legacy and the "Hinduization" of India, the failure of western ideas of socialism and nationalism and, hence, the "re-Islamization" of the Middle East, and now a debate over Westernization versus Russianization. More importantly, the efforts of the West to promote its values of democracy
and liberalism as universal values, to maintain its military predominance, and to advance its
economic interests engender countering responses from other civilizations.

The central axis of world politics is likely to be the conflict between “the West and the rest”
and the responses of non-Western civilizations to Western power and values. The most
prominent example of anti-Western cooperation is the connection between Confucian and
Islamic states that are challenging Western values and power.

Fifth, cultural characteristics and differences are less mutable and hence less easily
compromised and resolved than political and economic ones. In the former Soviet Union,
Communists can become democrats, the rich can become poor and the poor rich, but Russians
cannot become Estonians. A person can be half-French and half-Arab and even a citizen of two
countries. It is more difficult to be half-Catholic and half-Muslim.

Finally, economic regionalism is increasing. Successful economic regionalism will reinforce
civilization consciousness. On the other hand, economic regionalism may succeed only when it
is rooted in a common civilization. The European [Union] rests on the shared foundation of
European culture and Western Christianity. Japan, in contrast, faces difficulties in creating a
comparable economic entity in East Asia because it is a society and civilization unique to itself.
(Ibid.)

The reason why I have quoted such a long part from the original paper is based on
the fact that his theory is now quite dominant and misleading. The attitude toward
the various kinds of civilizations and cultures will determine the future of human
beings. In this regard, Chinese culture really can do something in this long process
of blending and integrating. Because one of the key values of Chinese culture, with
Confucianism as its core, is to advocate and encourage exchanges and integrations
of all cultures; at the same time, the individual and unique existence of them are
equally stressed. This is exactly what we need currently and it is the sole correct way
of dealing with the civilizations and cultures in the globalization context.

Three steps can be expected concerning that:

The first step is that Chinese culture needs to be modernized by absorbing blood
from new sources. Terms as well as equivalents should be exchanged and put into
the same standard mold. But it is not the story of assimilation.

The second step is to transplant the key values of Chinese culture into the system
of western culture to make it a mixed-blood new life.
The third step is the result of the marriage which will make the two cultures much stronger than ever before. It’s a win-win game. The rest of the civilizations and cultures will be dealt with by adopting the same approach.

The same story will logically and reasonably happen to the translation studies in China. It is based on the fact that “translation turn” in cultural studies has become a reality. There is no doubt that the turn will elevate the translation studies to a new high. From the perspective of Chinese translation studies, that’s the second turning point to keep in line with international translation studies. Chinese translation studies will be very important in the whole picture since it will be an indispensable part and component in it. Like the steps concerning the development and spread of Chinese culture, again, three parts will be included:

1. First and foremost, a systematic and thorough research and study of Chinese traditional translation theory is highly needed. The job is now underway. But more needs to be done.

2. Putting Chinese traditional translation theory into an international background is the second part for the sake of dialogs and exchanges in the same framework.

3. The last one will be a painful one for both sides. It’s a process of gaining and losing. But it is good for both sides.

In a word, translation turn is cultural studies that provides us with an unprecedented chance for Chinese cultural studies as well as translation studies. As a matter of fact, these two parts cannot be separated today. That’s why Homi Bhabha describes as follows:

"Translation is the performative nature of cultural communication. It is language in *actu* (enunciation, positionality) rather than language in *situ* (enonce, or propositionality). And the sigh of translation continually tells, or "tolls" the different times and spaces between cultural authority and its performative practices. The "time" of translation consists in that movement of meaning, the principle and practice of a communication that, in the words of de Man "puts the original in motion to decanonise it, giving it the movement of fragmentation, a wandering of errance, a kind of permanent exile" (1994: 228)."
Notes:
[1] Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere, *Constructing Cultures* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2003) 123.
[2] See Liao Qiyi, *Contemporary Translation Studies in UK* (pp.382-384).
[3] D.H. Lawrence, *Classic American Literature*, 54.
[4] Samuel P. Huntington “The Coming Clash of Civilization or, the West against the Rest.”
[5] From Wang Ning, “Translation as Cultural '(De)Colonisation.'”

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