Abstract

This paper is an analytical comparison of the Chinese original and the English translation of Dr. Li Zhisui’s *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*. Using contemporary reader-response and reader-centred translation theories (such as Eugene Nida’s “dynamic equivalence”), this paper argues that neither the translation process nor the translated text exists in a self-contained cultural or social vacuum.

In this study, commercial and cultural expectations are seemingly realized in the translation. The publishers’ profit and sales-oriented motives take into account the American target readers’ tastes, expectations and their predominantly stereotypical impressions of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communism based on popular belief perpetuated by media and academic channels. Li Zhisui’s first-hand account as a historical witness lends credibility and authority to his memoirs, but this does not suffice in the translation, which renders the Americanised narrative voice of Li Zhisui, speaking not only the readers’ common language, but with the style and tone familiar to American readers, sometimes even to the extent of subjective narratorial intrusiveness. All of these shape the translated text’s style and content, which differ significantly from the original.

Besides the hitherto elusive details of Mao Zedong’s sex life which serve as the translation’s most apparent selling point, the juxtaposition of the recurrent imperial metaphors (such as Mao’s “emperor” image) and the overwhelming self-consciousness of the projected narrative voice intensifies the inner tension of the potentially confrontational relationship between Mao Zedong and Li Zhisui. Their relationship is often likened to that between the emperor and the imperial physician in China’s imperial palace, which in turn, corresponds metaphorically to the Communist headquarters of Zhongnanhai in the memoirs. The heightened dramatic tension between the two men, effected by the stylistic manipulation of
the projected narrative voice and tone on the translator’s and editor’s part, is an implicit but equally crucial selling point of the translated text.

Assuming that translation is a continuous process of motivated choice, this paper critically assesses the conspicuous inconsistencies in form and content between the original and translated texts, accounting for the differing motivations of the writer and the translator as well as their dissimilar intended effects on readers. Based on these seemingly irreconcilable inconsistencies, one questions whether this particular translation really follows the typical translation process in which the translator alone translates the writer’s style and meaning faithfully, without biased influences from the readers, publishers and editors. This English rendering of the memoirs may start out as a translation, but gradually becomes a concomitant but amorphous collaboration between the translator, editor and publisher, resulting in a “transcreation” or a translational reconstruction, rather than conforming to the usually uncomplicated process model of translation.