Abstract

The stories of Sherlock Holmes, written by Sir Arthur Doyle (1859-1930), appeared over forty years between 1887 and 1927. These detective stories were translated and introduced into China at the same time, in the late Qing Dynasty, with the very first four translated stories appearing in Liang Qichao’s Shi wubao in 1896. Through an analytical comparison of the English originals and some of the early Chinese translations, this paper aims to find out the reasons underlying the discrepancies and so-called unfaithful renderings, and seeks to explain the motives behind the accurate translations of certain contents. From this study, this paper argues that translation is a complex process with many factors influencing the negotiation of meaning, and ought to be analyzed within the relevant social context. Furthermore, a need always precedes any translation, making it important to judge a translation according to its need, not merely by its “faithful” adherence to the original.

The corrupt Qing government with its resulting social and political unrest called for a need to reform China, so as to pull her out of her weak and poor state. Western detective fiction, due to its content, had been chosen as a tool to educate the masses and hence achieve the goal of strengthening the country and saving her from the great national crisis. Thus, large numbers of Sherlock Holmes detective stories were translated and they enjoyed great popularity among Chinese readers.

A critical comparison of the translations with their originals reveals that cultural differences are the main cause for many discrepancies. The narrative strategies, translations of titles, Western “God”, moral issues and description of women and men have problems of “domestication”, omission, and erroneous renderings. Such phenomenon can be attributed to the cultural constraints of the targeted language. In addition, the translators’ limited knowledge and understanding
of the source language culture resulted in faulty translations of clothing, food and chemical experiments.

The motive of translation, which was to educate the people as a means to save the nation, influenced the attitude of the translators towards the treatment of different contents. The translators exercised their own discretion in determining which things were useful to their aim and which were not. As a result, large portions of original texts, which were deemed unimportant to the translators, were omitted. This is evident in the erroneous translations of clothing and food, though the translators' inability plays a part too. However, many new things and new knowledge which could inspire the minds of the people are faithfully and accurately translated—they were successfully “foreignised” for the Chinese readers. These items show that the translators held fast to the aim of translation as a guiding principle in the process of translation, though at times they were limited by their own knowledge, as in the case of translating chemical experiments.

Through this study, one can easily see that translation can never be carried out in a social and cultural vacuum, and faithfulness alone cannot be a fair appraisal of whether a translation is good or not. The many factors involved in the translation process have to be taken into account. Also, it is essential to view a translation from a macro socio-political perspective, to see whether it has achieved the aim of translation and fulfilled the needs of the society at that point in time.