

# Descriptive Translation Studies' Accountability for Translation Phenomena:

## A Case Study of *Hong Lou Meng*

### L'INTERPRETATION DU PHENOMENE DE TRADUCTION PAR LES ETUDES DE TRADUCTION DESCRIPTIVE:

#### ETUDE DESCRIPTIVE DES TRADUCTIONS DU *REVE DANS LE PAVILLON ROUGE*

Li Qiaozhen<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the different versions of *Hong Lou Meng* from the perspective of DTC (Descriptive Translation Studies). First, it introduces the origin of DTC and its main features. Then, it expounds how to study different English versions of *Hong Lou Meng* in terms of Polysystem Theory. Finally, a conclusion is drawn that it is necessary to study versions from the perspective of DTC, because it can avoid the drawbacks of the traditional source-oriented translation study and could better explain the complex translation activities.

**Key words:** Descriptive Translation Studies, Polysystem Theory, *Hong Lou Meng*

**Résumé:** L'article présente une analyse des traductions du *Rêve dans le Pavillon rouge* apparues aux différentes époques historiques dans la perspective de la traduction descriptive. Tout d'abord, l'histoire de la traduction descriptive et ses caractéristiques sont présentées. Ensuite, l'auteur analyse les différentes versions du *Rêve dans le Pavillon rouge* avec la Théorie de Polysystème. Il en conclut que l'étude descriptive de la traduction est nécessaire parce qu'elle évite la limite de l'étude traditionnelle de centrer sur le texte original pour arriver ainsi à mieux interpréter cette activité complexe humaine qu'est la traduction.

**Mots-Clés:** Etudes de traduction descriptive, Théorie de Polysystème. *Le Rêve dans le Pavillon rouge*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

"Descriptive Translation Studies", this term, was first put forward by James Holmes, a Holland scholar. James Holmes published a famous paper titled "The Name and Nature of Translation Studies" at the Third International Congress of Applied Linguistics held in Copenhagen in 1972. In his paper, James Holmes made a scientific division of translology and he argued that "translatology is divided into two branches: pure translation studies and applied translation studies; pure translation studies can be subdivided into Descriptive Translation Studies and theoretical translation study".<sup>2</sup> Descriptive Translation Studies includes "(1) product-oriented study; (2) process-oriented study;

function-oriented study".<sup>3</sup> James Holmes' division of translology has been widely recognized by translation scholars and exerted great influence on the celebrated translation scholars such as Even-Zohar, Gideon Toury in Israel and Andre Lefevere in America, all of whom set about making a new theoretical exploration under James Holmes' framework.

Toury responded positively toward Holmes' map of discipline. Based on the Polysystem put forward by his colleague Even-Zohar, he enriched and further developed the branch of Descriptive Translation Studies and published his monograph *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*, which greatly deepened people's understanding of Descriptive Translation Studies. Toury argues that Descriptive Translation Studies is empirical science, attempting to describe, explain and predict the translation phenomena.<sup>4</sup> At present, a certain scholar named this kind of study as "Descriptive Translation Theory", which is inappropriate in my opinion.

<sup>1</sup> English Department of Central China Normal University, China.

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<sup>2</sup>李紅滿 (2002). 論當代西方翻譯研究范式的轉變[J]. 外語與翻譯, 2, 31-35.

<sup>3</sup>張美芳(2000). 翻譯學的目標與結構—霍姆斯的譯學構想介評[J]. 中國翻譯, 2, 66-69.

<sup>4</sup> Toury, Gideon. (2001). *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press,

According to Homes' map of discipline, both Descriptive Translation Studies and theoretical translation study are involved in the translation study, and therefore the relationship between them is coordinate rather than subordinate, that is to say, "Descriptive Translation Studies" isn't included in the translation theory. Thus, the term, "descriptive translation theory" is not legitimate. In his monograph, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*, Toury expounds the relationship between Descriptive Translation Studies and translation theory and he argues that Descriptive Translation Studies, making a minute description and penetrating explanation of translation phenomena, summarizes a series of rules and principles pertaining to translation activities, which lays the foundation for the formation of translation theory, and meanwhile the translation theory makes it possible to describe detailedly the translation phenomena.

Traditional translation studies is source-oriented, according to which, the value of the translated version is assessed through the comparison between the version and the original. In that case, the translated version which represents the original faithfully is regarded as good translation. Based on the comparison between the translated version and the original, the translation criteria such as "equivalence", "faithfulness" is put forward. Catford has once said that "translation may be defined as follows: the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL). The central problem of translation practice is that of finding TL translation equivalents. A central task of translation theory is that of defining the nature and conditions of translation equivalence".<sup>5</sup> This kind of translation criteria, based on the comparison between the source text and target text, is static and closed, which ignores that translators are constrained by the socio-politics, economy, culture, ideology and so on in the target language system. Thus it is unjustified to assess the value of the translated version according to such criteria. According to this, Lin Shu's translation will be viewed as meaningless and valueless.

It is just because the influence of the traditional translation studies that when Toury argued that the translation study turned toward target-oriented direction, the translation circle was greatly astonished and many scholars couldn't agree with him. Toury deemed that "a translation will be any target language text which is presented or regarded as such in a target system, on whatever grounds".<sup>6</sup> Toury's definition of translation broadens the field of the translation study and thus adaptation, rewriting, imitation, relay interpretation, pseudo-translation etc., traditionally not viewed as translation, are all included in the circle of translation

study. Descriptive Translation Studies sets the translated version against the target-cultural background and the emphasis is put on the acceptance of the target readers toward the translated version. Therefore, once the translation is finished, the original becomes invisible and so does the translator, while what come into sight are the translated version and the target readers, and "whether such a text in fact existed and what the exact relationship between original and translation is, is of no major interest to the descriptive translation scholar."<sup>7</sup> Here, the translated version has been regarded as part of the target system.

Obviously, Descriptive Translation Studies also has its shortcomings. As it broadens the field of the translation study, it also blurred the translation study. Whatever can be recognized as translation in the target system will be taken into consideration for the translation study, even including the pseudo-translation without the original and thus the distinction between writing and translating become fuzzy.

Descriptive Translation Studies stresses the translation phenomena should be described objectively and no value judgment is needed, which "is of no help for people to judge the quality of the translated version, and with Descriptive Translation Studies overstated, it is of use to improve the ordinary people's translation competence and what is worse, it will do harm to the translation practice".<sup>8</sup> As is known to all, many translations are done not because the translator have to do so constrained by the target-cultural system but because the translators' low linguistic and cultural competence lead to mistranslation. For the latter case, if we don't make any kind of judgement, it will do harm to the development of translation study.

## 2. A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY ON DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF *HONG LOU MENG*

Different times witnessed different versions of *Hong Lou Meng*, the classics of Chinese literature and if it is assessed according to the traditional translation criteria such as "equivalence", "faithfulness", "the historical value of most versions will be minimized".<sup>9</sup> "Different times, different social needs and different translation purpose presuppose different translated versions", so it is inappropriate to assess the versions "with the single, universal and unchangeable criteria".<sup>10</sup> From the

<sup>7</sup> House, Juliane. *Translation Quality Assessment: a Model Revisited*[M]. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 1997.

<sup>8</sup>韓子滿,劉芳. (2005). 描述翻譯研究的成就與不足[J]. 外語學刊, 3.

<sup>9</sup>韓子滿,劉芳. (2005). 描述翻譯研究的成就與不足[J]. 外語學刊, 3, 97-101.

<sup>10</sup>張南峰(1998). 從夢想到現實-對翻譯學科的東張西望[J].

<sup>5</sup> J.C. (1965). Catford. *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*[M]. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Toury, Gideon. (2001). *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

perspective of Descriptive Translation Studies, different versions of *Hong Lou Meng* are analyzed including the different textual features and the reason of the production of different versions and thus the social norms constraining the translators is exposed to us. These are instrumental in accounting the complicated translation activities.

Just as it is the mentioned above, Descriptive translation studies includes product-oriented study, process-oriented study, function-oriented study. It is of significance to make a function-oriented study on different versions of *Hong Lou Meng* produced under different times and meanwhile the reason why certain version is produced is analyzed in terms of socio-politics, economy and culture etc. under certain social conditions, which results in an objective and justified assessment. According to Toury, function, process, and product are not only interrelated with each other, but also they are an integral part, though they are three different approaches. "When it comes to the institutional level, that of the discipline as a whole, the program must aspire to lay bare the interdependencies of all three aspects".<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, analyzing versions of *Hong Lou Meng* is mainly function-oriented, and yet if the product (version) and the process of translation is not involved in the analysis, the function of versions will be unknown.

In the Chapter 3 of his monograph *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*, Toury expounded the methodology of Descriptive Translation Studies. He holds that the translation study begins with comparison and he said "due to greater availability of a number of parallel translations into one language, which came into being in different periods of time, their comparison has been even more common. Such comparisons are possible, of course, but they represent a much more complex task than one would think".<sup>12</sup> P73 *Hong Lou Meng* has nine versions produced from 1830 to 1986<sup>[9]</sup>, and thus it is a complicated task with too many references gathered. In Toury's opinion, there are three kinds of comparisons: (1) comparing the different versions translated from the same source language during the same period. It is very simple, since few variables are involved. (2) comparing the different versions translated from the same source language during different periods. (3) comparing the different versions translated from different source languages during different or the same period. The different versions of *Hong Lou Meng* can be studied with the three different approaches. Chen Hongwei and Jiang Fan<sup>[9]</sup> have made a descriptive study on *Hong Lou Meng* adopting the first two approaches and yet no one has

done that adopting the third approach, namely, making a comparative study among the English versions, Germany versions, French versions etc., probably because the third approach is the most complex of all. As is known to all, different versions of target language reveal different language and cultural tradition and thus the researcher has to master different languages to undertake such kind of research. However, if some scholars are capable of undertaking such kind of research, some more universal principles may be drawn from the intricate study, which can lay a solid foundation for the formation of theory.

"Once one's attention is turned to finding out how the Relationship Postulate was realized in a particular case, it is clear that one would first have to establish the SOURCE-TEXT'S IDENTITY, and in an appropriate way too".<sup>13</sup> P74 Here, "establish the SOURCE-TEXT'S IDENTITY" means identifying the source text of the translation. In history, many master pieces of literature have more than one edition, including different editions of the same language and different editions of different languages. The latter is probably translated from the source text, and then the translated version as the source text is translated into another language, so to speak, the relay interpretation. Mchugh's translated version of *Hong Lou Meng* is translated from German rather than Chinese. For the early versions of *Hong Lou Meng*, the choice of the source text was rather arbitrary. Later on, only Yang Xianyi, Gladys Yang and David Hawkes, John Minford made a careful choice of the source text.

Polysystem has laid the foundation for Descriptive Translation Studies and in terms of Polysystem, the systems are not independent but interconnected and interactive with each other, but Even-Zohar argues that "These systems are not equal but hierarchical within the Polysystem. Some systems hold the central position while others occupy the periphery position".<sup>14</sup> The Polysystem of literature can be subdivided into original literature and translated literature. "Translations tend towards adequacy when translated literature assumes a central position and towards acceptability when translated literature occupies a peripheral position".<sup>15</sup>

During the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the translators of *Hong Long Meng* only selected part of the original work to translate, because at that time, "the translated literature occupies a peripheral position in the Polysystem of English culture and literature".<sup>16</sup> The translated versions have to meet the requirements of the target readers and "the purpose of translation is

外國語, 3.

<sup>11</sup> 陳德鴻, 張南峰. (2000). *西方翻譯理論精選* [C]. 香港: 香港城市大學出版社.

<sup>12</sup> Toury, Gideon. (2001). *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

<sup>13</sup> Toury, Gideon. *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> 陳德鴻, 張南峰. (2000). *西方翻譯理論精選* [C]. 香港: 香港城市大學出版社, 115.

<sup>15</sup> Even-Zohar (1990). Polysystem Theory [J]. *Poetics Today*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> 陳宏薇, 江帆. (2003). 難忘的歷程—《紅樓夢》英譯事業的描寫性研究 [J]. *中國翻譯*, 5, 46-52.

exclusively to provide language materials for the target readers". Even-Zohar argues that "Polysystem is not static and unchangeable" The translated English literature from Chinese, in a peripheral position, is not content to stay in the peripheral position, and is struggling to move towards the center but the process is rather slow and sluggish. Until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the translators absorbed the achievements of the refreshed study of *Hong Lou Meng* and thus they possessed the ability to translate the whole work, but "the Polysystem of English culture is rather self-sufficient, and the translated English literature from Chinese have to stay in the peripheral position". The translated versions during this period, for instance, Wang Liangzhi's version, "cancel all the parts irrelevant to the love story of Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu, and only the tragic love of the two was translated", because their main purpose is to cater for the aesthetic taste of the Anglo-American readers". It is more the compromise between target readers' requirements and translators' intention than between the translators' intention and the Publishing House. Until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "with the foundation of the new China, the cultural exchange between East and West become equal and mutually beneficial", the translated English literature from Chinese took a significant step toward the center and the gap between the two was further narrowing. The two versions during the period, Yang Xianyi, Gladys Yang's version and David Hawkes, John Minford's version, completely represent the original work, unlike the previous versions, abridged or canceled according to the target readers' requirements. Therefore, the growing Chinese economy and the increasing political status make it possible for the translators to respect the wholeness of the original work rather than to cater for the readers' aesthetic taste.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The paper makes an analysis of different versions of *Hong Lou Meng* from the perspective of Descriptive Translation Studies. Its drawback is laid bare when the methodology of traditional translation criticism is employed to assess the different versions of *Hong Lou Meng*. The static, closed comparison of different versions alone comes to an unconvincing and subjective conclusion. On the contrary, Descriptive Translation Studies sets the versions against the target-cultural background and attempts to seek out the constraining factors such as politics, economy, and ideology in the translating process as well as explores the reason leading to the incompleteness of the translated versions. This kind of study takes extratextual factors into consideration and thus it can better explain the intrigue translation activities. Of course, its drawbacks have also been mentioned, and if one only describes objectively the translation phenomena and makes no value judgement towards the translations, it will do harm to the development of translation activities. So far, the scholars have mainly made a descriptive study on literature master pieces such as *Hong Lou Meng* and *The Tale of Genji* and the translation of them was done by some celebrated translators, which implies that they can understand the original correctly and there is no misunderstanding due to the linguistic and cultural incompetence. In that case, it is acceptable and the value judgement is unnecessary. However, if the translation is done by some beginners, it has been taken into consideration that if he can fully and correctly understand the source text. In that case the value judgement of the translated version is necessary and urgent.

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### THE AUTHOR

Li Qiaozhen, School of Foreign Languages, Huazhong Normal University, Wuhan, Hubei, 430079, P.R. China.  
E-mail : kugua407@163.com