

## Linguistic Transformation and Cultural Reconstruction:

### Contradictions in the Translation of Loanwords in Late Qing

LIU Jun<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** A large amount of loanwords were introduced into Chinese after the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. YAN Fu's translations and "Japanese loanword" advocated by LIANG Qichao and WANG Guowei represented two different ways of linguistic reform. Language is a complicated web of significance and when we speak a word, it not only signifies a concept but also classifies category. Therefore, the semantic changes of a single word will cause the reconstruction of the relative elements of the language and culture. The translation of loanwords in late Qing was a cross cultural semantic transformation, which resulted in great changes of the traditional Chinese episteme. In this process, YAN Fu's translation and the Japanese translation represented two different strategies of cultural reconstruction, but they both encountered the same difficult problem of self-confliction. On the one hand, the "cultural determinism" and the "linguistic determinism" existed contradictorily in YAN Fu's cultural-linguistic thoughts, especially in his only linguistic work --*Yin Wen Han Gu* (《英文漢語》). On the other hand, though "Japanese loanword" was easier to understand than YAN Fu's translation, the simplification of the translation caused rupture and confusion in the Sino-west cultural transformation so that the positive cultural selection of LIANG Qichao and WANG Guowei turned out to be the passive acceptance. This contradiction was embodied in the arguments on "the Great Harmony" and "the quintessence of Chinese culture" in late Qing and it can also be interpreted as the confliction between "universalism" and "relativism", "translatability" and "untranslatability", "globalism" and "localism" in the current cultural context.

**Key words:** Loanwords; Language; Culture; YAN Fu; LIANG Qichao; WANG Guowei

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<sup>1</sup> Institute of Comparative Literature and Culture, Peking University, 100871, China. E-mail: Traceyliu@sohu.com  
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The thorough defeat in the Sino-Japan War of 1894-1895 forced the intelligentsia of late Qing realized the self-strengthening course of China should be a complete social reform by learning from the West comprehensively. So they began to translate and introduce the modern Western learning in an unprecedented way. Hundreds of books were translated into Chinese in the first two decades of the 20th century from YAN Fu's Tian Yan Lun (嚴復,《天演論》,1898) to all kinds of textbooks and encyclopedias translated by the Chinese overseas students in Japan. In this process, a large quantity of loanwords were introduced to Chinese including “進化”(evolution), “自由”(freedom), “經濟”(economy), “文學”(literature), “社會”(society), etc. The loanwords within the context of the translations were not of isolated existence but connected with specific syntactical structures and styles determined by different translation strategies. Therefore, the translation of loanwords in late Qing actually caused great changes of classical Chinese in many aspects, which aroused a heated dispute at that time (LUO Zhitian,羅志田: 2001).

As a translator, YAN Fu was the first scholar to introduce the modern western social science to the intelligentsia of late Qing. He had great enthusiasm for the classical Chinese, especially the lexicon and syntax before Han dynasty. On the contrary, LIANG Qichao(梁啟超) and WANG Guowei(王國維) advocated the “Japanese loanwords”(日譯新詞) and the “Japanese style”(東瀛文體) which were taken directly from the Japanese translation of the western books. These two ways of translation represented different cultural-linguistic thoughts and indicated the different directions in the reform of the Chinese language and the reconstruction of the traditional culture. But, unfortunately, both of them encountered the same inherent problem and embarked on the road of self-contradiction unexpectedly.

From the semiotic point of view, culture is a web of significance which is spun by man and passed from generation to generation as the meaning pattern (Geertz: 1973). Being the core of culture, language is the most effective symbolic system, therefore, the dialogue of Chinese and the western culture can be seen as a translation in the metaphorical sense. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the language determines the way that people interpret the world around them and the culture they live in. There are no two languages representing the same social reality, people always select words and structures to express a certain pattern of thinking. So, a language not only represents but also creates a specific world view (Whorf: 1956). Therefore, in this sense, the cultural world is a symbolic world and the border of culture is actually the border of language. If we agree to this hypothesis, the dialogue of the Chinese and the western culture should not be considered as the literal translation, but the dismantlement of SL and the reassembling in TL. As the cultural deconstruction and reconstruction and a process of meaning production, it transplants the seed of SL text to the TL context (Bassnett, Lefevere: 1998). From this point of view, the translation of loanwords in late Qing was not only the lexicon expansion and the style reformation, but the deconstruction and reconstruction of the traditional Chinese culture.

## 2. CONTRADICTION IN THE TRANSLATION OF LOANWORDS IN LATE QING

### 2.1 Ying Wen Han GU: YAN Fu's Cultural-Linguistic Thoughts

As an interpreter of the Chinese and the western culture, YAN Fu was a great thinker practicing the cross-cultural symbolic transformation. His cultural-linguistic thoughts on language itself and the relationship of language and culture were connected with his translation strategies and culture selection, even with the understanding of his thoughts as a whole. From this perspective, we should reevaluate the only linguistic work of YAN Fu, *Ying Wen Han Gu-- English Grammar Explained in Chinese* (《英文漢語》). Published by the Commercial Press in 1904, it was a textbook of English grammar interpreted

in the classical Chinese, As a byproduct, YAN Fu constructed the classical Chinese grammar system through the comparison with that of English, at the same time, a large number of neologisms were cited for explaining the part of speech, including “liberty”(自繇), “economics”(計學), “justice”(公道), “constitution”(憲法), “human”(人道), “logic”(名學), “synthesis”(會通也), “metaphysics”(出形氣), “civil”(治化), “monocracy”(獨治之制), “nature”(與生俱來者, 如孟子’良知’), etc. What’s more important was that YAN Fu expressed his opinions about the origination, essence and functions of language in the prologue of the book and exhibited the contradictions of the “linguistic determination” and the “cultural determination” (Stainer: 1975) rooted in his mind.

YAN Fu preferred the lexicon and syntax before Han dynasty to the “Japanese loanword” and the “Japanese style”. Therefore, he tried to maintain the semantic system and the cultural connotation of the classical Chinese to the greatest degree in the loanwords translation in his works. Taking “計學”(economics) as an example, YAN Fu investigated the connotation and denotation of this word in English from the etymological perspective and indicated that China had the knowledge of economics originally but lacked of the sphere of learning. After that, he looked for a corresponding conception cautiously from the classical Chinese to determine the translation word in the semantic system and “計學” was selected to match the original meaning of “economics” for the similarity of these two words. What YAN Fu meant to do was to plant the translation words into the Chinese language without any estrangement. It was undeniable, Western learning played a critical role in the introduction of new conception, but from the internal perspective, Chinese learning took the place of West learning as the frame of reference in the redetermination of the cultural system. On the next step, YAN Fu put “計學”(economics) into different contexts to determine the relative expressions of the translation word, such as “財政”(finance), “食貨”(shì huò), etc (嚴復:1902), thus “economics” attained meanings in the system of differential signs of the Chinese language. In this process of determining signifier and signified, YAN Fu tried his best to find the maximal intersection of the signified between “計學” and “economics”. As a result of the domesticating translation, “計學” got an ability of cross-cultural communication, and gave YAN Fu’s ideal readers—the scholars familiar with the Chinese ancient classical works—an interpretive space of the meaning production. So, it is clear that YAN Fu emphasized the characteristic of Chinese culture and the untranslatability of translation in the semantic level, attempting to implement the semantic integration in the complex significance web.

But, when it came to the construction of the classical Chinese grammar, YAN Fu turned to the opposite way completely. YAN Fu insisted Chinese and English had the same origin and rules, although he admitted Chinese had its own feature. From this point of view, it was reasonable to construct the grammar system of the classical Chinese according to the English grammar, as YAN Fu had said repeatedly in the book of *Ying Wen Han Gu*, “the western language was the same as Chinese in the ancient times” and “the appellation of the western language was the same as that of Chinese in old times.” Grammar is the rules of language, connected with the specific thinking and expression way of people use the language, and embodies the specificity of the culture. Just as B. L. Whorf had said:

...in informal terms, that users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different view of the world (1956, 221).

It would be a negation of the unique feature of Chinese and a neglect of the difference between English and Chinese to some extent by constructing Chinese grammar in accordance with that of English completely.

The contradiction in YAN Fu’s thoughts was articulated more directly in the preface of *Ying Wen Han Gu*, he criticized the way of learning from the West only through the translation books, and said:

Language and characters is the value of academic. You can buy nothing in the market without anything valuable...Is there any possible way for the western people to understand the concise style and the significance of the most important works of Confucius *Yi Jing* (the Book of Change, 《易經》) and *Chun Qiu* (the Spring and Autumn Annals, 《春秋》) through the translation? The classical works of Qin and Han dynasty, *Li Sao* (The Lament, 《離騷》) by Qu Yuan(屈原), *Shi Ji* (Records of the Grand Historian, 《史記》) by Sima Qian(司馬遷), aren't they inimitable? Can it be possible for the western people to see the sincere heart and appreciate the enigmatical context by translation?

Here, YAN Fu pointed out that there is untranslatability between Chinese learning and West learning. "The concise style and the significance" as well as "the enigmatical context" embodied the specificity of Chinese and the characteristics of Chinese culture determined by the language. Therefore, the only way to grasp the genuine West learning was to study the western language. Obviously, YAN Fu supported the "Linguistic determinism" on this problem, but another voice emergent from the text of the same book, showing the inclination of the "cultural determinism", which is called linguistic translatability because of the common origination and rules of different languages. He argued in the text of *Ying Wen Han Gu*: "It is not absurd that people of Europe and Asia were the same race in the ancient times" and "Chinese and English were the same language before." The ultimate outcome of learning English he had expected was to reach the universal and common language and culture. Just as he articulated in the end of the preface: "the truth universally acknowledged is the same in human mind, and at that time, there would be no difference between scholars and the different names of Chinese and western language, new and old would disappear..." So, he assumed scholars familiar with the traditional classics studied West learning through western languages at first, and then, after thirty years, if permitted, studied it through Chinese, and got to the general truth at last. But the question is now that there is untranslatability between Chinese and western languages, how can we really get to the "general truth"? On the other hand, if Chinese and western races and languages have the common origination, and if different languages and cultures are essentially homogeneous, why cannot we study West learning through translation, why can't Chinese and western languages communicate with each other through translation? It is an evident paradox in YAN Fu's thought.

The loanwords brought new elements to Chinese culture, arousing changes on lexicon and semantic system as well as grammar and style. YAN Fu who involved in the arguments got into trouble of the contradiction. On the grammatical side, YAN Fu approved the universalistic "cultural determinism" and tried to construct the grammar of Classical Chinese according to English grammar, but on the semantic side, the inclination of the "linguistic determinism" made him take the strategy of "domestication" on the basis of Chinese culture in the Sino-western cultural transformation. The situation is very interesting and thought-provoking for readers in the 21st century.

## 2.2 LIANG Qichao and WANG Guowei Supported "Japanese loanwords"

In contrasted to YAN Fu, LIANG Qichao and WANG Guowei advocated "Japanese loanwords" for the propagation of enlightenment thought. LIANG Qichao had said in *New Citizen Journal* (《新民叢報》) that YAN Fu's translation was too profound to understand for common readers. He argued that Japanese loanwords were better tools for the propaganda of new thoughts and he was willing to use these words in his political works, including "民主"(democracy), "權利"(right), "歷史"(history), "宗教"(religion), etc. In *Comprehensive Discussion of Reform: Translation Book* (《變法通議.論譯書》), Liang said that after the MeiJi reform, Japanese showed great enthusiasm for West learning and the translated books of that era involved all categories of western science, besides, there were also considerable new works on West learning written by Japanese. Because of learning Japanese is easier for Chinese people, it is convenient to introduce West learning by translating Japanese books (1897). More severe critiques came from WANG Guowei, who pointed out that although there were lots of proper translations in YAN Fu's works, the improper translations could not be neglected. The most important problem was that he chose the classical Chinese words to translate western neologisms. For example, Wang preferred the Japanese loanwords "進化"(jin hua) to "天演"(tian yan) as the translation of "evolution", and preferred "同

情”(tong qing) to “善相感”(shan xiang gan) as the translation of “sympathy”. He also said YAN Fu made mistakes when he translated “宇”(yu) as “space” and “宙”(zhou) as “time”, because he failed to render the full meaning of these words. Therefore, WANG Guowei indicated that although some Japanese loanwords were translated inaccurately, the neologisms created by ourselves were not better (1905).

LIANG Qichao who advocated Japanese loanwords also supported constructing Chinese grammar according to the Latin grammar system. Ma Jiangzhong(馬建忠) was the first overseas Chinese student in France, who was influenced deeply by the Universal Grammar. LIANG Qichao had learned Latin from him and read the scripture of *Ma Shi Wen Tong* (Ma's Grammar, 《馬氏文通》: 1898). As we know, the traditional Chinese linguists paid more attention to phonology rather than grammar, so the grammar of classical Chinese in the modern sense didn't come into being until *Ma Shi Wen Tong* and *Ying Wen Han Gu*, which were considered as the first two grammar works in late Qing (LIANG Qichao: 1921). Liang regarded it as the development of the academic of Qing dynasty and the outcome of cross-cultural communication as well.

Objectively speaking, the strategy of simplification embodied in Japanese loanword accelerated the propagation of new thoughts, representing a revolutionary and positive culture selection, but this sort of translation caused some confusion in the Chinese semantic system. Just as LIANG Qichao had said in *The Benefits of Learning Japanese* (《論學日本文之益》, 1899), it would take one year of time to learn oral Japanese and half a year to learn written Japanese. Several days of learning would get a little success and a big success monthly. It is the utilitarianism in the loanwords translation that led to the semantic obscurity. In YAN Fu's opinion, these books were rather the irresponsible translator's creation than the genuine West learning and could not fulfill the aim of introducing the enlightenment thoughts. For example, “經濟”(jing ji) is a Chinese word originally, which means to make the society prosperous and to make people live and work with happiness. After Japanese scholars used it to translate the West learning of “economics”, it attained new meanings of “the management of money” or “the production, distribution and consumption of the goods”. When it came back into Chinese, the overlapped meaning in “經濟” was easy to cause distortion and confusion, which aroused heated dispute at that time. Even LIANG Qichao himself realized the problem and suggested revising the translation according to the original meaning of English. A large number of loanwords were introduced through the translation of the overseas Chinese students in Japan, and made the relationship of signifier and signified in Chinese became very complicated. Moreover, the simplified transport of the loanwords cut off the way of direct dialogues of Chinese culture and western culture, bringing about some ambiguity to the semantic system of Chinese.

Besides, the introduction of the loanwords led to the changes of the traditional academic and the reintegration of the cultural elements. Language is a complicated web of significance and when we speak a word, it not only signifies a concept but also classifies category, therefore, the semantic changes of a single word will cause the reconstruction of the relative elements of the language and culture. The introduction of the loanwords in late Qing was a cross-cultural semantic transformation, which resulted in the change of “the order of things” in Chinese culture consequentially (Foucault: 1971). For example, the Japanese loanword “小說”(fiction/ novel), as a part of literature (文學) in the modern sense is different from the concept of “小說”(xiao shuo) in the traditional Chinese academic. That was the reason why LU Xun(魯迅) identified the Chinese fiction/novel from the “classification of the four categories”(四部分類法) in the traditional Chinese academic at the very beginning of his work *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction* (《中國小說史略》, 1923-1924), excluded the documents that originally belonged to the category of “小說” but not in accordance with the new conception. The fictionality and narrative of fiction or novel were emphasized in contrast to the reality of history. As a consequence, the concept of history in traditional academic changed along with the connotation of “小說” simultaneously, which different from the “史部”(shi bu) in the old classification. It was clear that the reference was totally transformed to West learning in determining the characteristics of a document and defining genre. Thus, the introduction of loanwords was a big challenge to the “classification of the four categories” and the rewriting of the traditional Chinese episteme. In a word, the process of loanwords introduction was accompanied by the construction of the modern academic classification, and it was a decoding and

recoding of the traditional Chinese culture. In this sense, the loanwords translation can be regarded as not only the linguistic transformation but also the cultural reconstruction.

LIANG Qichao and WANG Guowei suggested the interaction of the western thoughts and the traditional Chinese thoughts in the cross-cultural communication, and hoped to get a harmonious status by creating a new type of culture. But a large amount of Japanese loanwords swarmed into Chinese reconstructed a new semantic system and helped to built up a different episteme with the label of West. Therefore, the positive cultural selection of the scholars who supported the Japanese translation became a passive acceptance of Western learning, getting into the trouble of self-confliction at last.

### 3. CONCLUSION

From the analysis mentioned above, we can see that YAN Fu's inclination of linguistic determination made him insist the untranslatability in the cross-culture communication and take the strategy of "domestication" on the basis of Chinese culture in the semantic level. But on the grammatical level, the universal cultural determinism made him construct Chinese grammar totally according to English grammar. As another way of cultural transformation, LIANG Qichao and WANG Guowei preferred the Japanese loanword to YAN Fu's translation. Although the introduction of these neologisms enlarged the influence of the new thoughts, the semantic rupture resulted in the ambiguity of Chinese. And the new concepts and categories introduced by Japanese loanword was the rewriting of the traditional Chinese episteme, which was contrary to the idea of integrating the traditional Chinese and western culture. The two schools in the loanword translation chose different strategies and plans but encountered the same paradox, which was an awkward situation in the linguistic and cultural transformation. This contradiction was embodied in the dispute about "the Great Harmony" and "the quintessence of Chinese culture" in intelligentsia of late Qing and it can be interpreted as the confliction of "translatability" and "untranslatability" or "linguistic determinism" and "culture determinism" from the perspective of language and culture, and also the confliction of "universalism" and "relativism" in the philosophical level, or the contradiction of "globalism" and "localism" in the current cultural context. Moreover, the two sides of the contradiction often juxtaposed in one text, just as Said indicated that sometimes the so-called pluralism was only the interior feature of the universalism and the endeavor of self-speaking turned out to be passive speaking (Said: 1978).

In conclusion, rethinking the paradox situation that the three great scholars in late Qing encountered will provide us with a new starting point for the future research and help to find out our identity in the new historical context.

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