

- **THE FALLACIES AND FOLLIES OF
PRESCRIPTIVE CULTURAL
RELATIVISM IN TRANSLATION
STUDIES**

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Abstract

- Inspired by a prescriptive version of cultural relativism, some scholars have raised the issue of Eurocentrism in international translation studies. Claiming that Western theories are not applicable to peripheral cultures, they accuse non-Western translation scholars who subscribe to Western theories of being educated away from their own culture and society.

- On the other hand, they suggest that there is something to be learned from the Chinese concept of '*fanyi*', but their suggestion is based on a series of misunderstanding. It will be argued that the Western concern for Eurocentrism is Eurocentric, and that radical relativists in the West are guilty of colonialism.

Fallacies:

1. Cultures are equally valid (patterns of life)

--Hence, you cannot criticise any (peripheral) cultures

--You cannot say that Western (translation) theories are more sophisticated or that translation studies in the West is at a more advanced stage

2. Cultures are different

--Western (translation) theories are not applicable to the non-West

- 3. Cultures should remain different
 - Western theories should not be applied to non-Western data

- 4. The dissemination of Western theories must be a result of :
 - Eurocentrism
 - Cultural colonization
 - Hegemony of knowledge

Follies:

1. Scholars in the non-West who think that Western theories are better--
 - have been educated away from their own culture and society;
 - are guilty of self-colonization
 - have drifted away from their intellectual predecessors

2. There is something for Western translation studies to learn from the non-West, such as the Chinese concept of '*fanyi*'
3. Translation studies in the non-West should be de-Westernized, for the sake of “bio-diversity”
4. Only the East is capable of universal universalism

Previous works

- 2009. Repertoire transfer and resistance: The Westernization of translation studies in China. *The Translator* Vol. 15 No. 2 (special issue on Chinese discourses on translation: positions and perspectives). 305-25.
- 2015. Does ‘Translation’ Reflect a Narrower Concept Than ‘Fanyi’?--On the Impact of Western Theories on China and the Concern about Eurocentrism. *Translation and Interpreting Studies*, Vol. 10, Issue 2, pp. 223-242.

- 2017. A Polysystemist's Response to Prescriptive Cultural Relativism and Postcolonialism. *Across Languages and Cultures*, Vol. 18, Issue 1, pp. 133-154, 2017.
- 2018. Voices from the Periphery: Further Reflections on Universalism versus Relativism in Translation Studies. *Perspectives*, Vol. 26, Issue 4, pp. 463-477, 2018.

- 2009. “Repertoire Transfer and Resistance: The Westernization of Translation Studies in China”:
 - the westernization of translation studies in China is simply a case in which a polysystem borrows repertoires from others to fulfil certain purposes, saving the effort of inventing them entirely by itself.”

Referee:

- The author [...] explains the development of the Chinese discourse on translation through the use of terms and approaches of Western translation theories. [...]
- the article [...] just reduces the Chinese discourse on translation as yet another data to be illuminated under the light of ‘Western’ theories

- The article in fact ends with a very disappointing concluding sentence

- Towards the end of the article, the author is more and more **sarcastic and negative** about the attitudes of **his fellow Chinese translation studies scholars**. [...]
- (e.g. [Western theories are] “**descriptive and more sophisticated**”, implying that **the Chinese discourse is less so**).

- I strongly believe that the author would find the following works relevant to his article,
 - Susam-Sarajeva, Şebnem. 2002. “A ‘Multilingual’ and ‘International’ Translation Studies?”. Theo Hermans ed. *Crosscultural Transgressions. Research Models in Translation Studies II: Historical and Ideological Issues*. Manchester: St. Jerome, 193-207.

- models and tools originating from the centre and created initially by using central data, do not necessarily prove useful when they are taken out of their contexts and put to use on peripheral data (Susam-Sarajeva 2002: 195)

- The present domination of Western theories in the discipline is a case where what matters is not “the intrinsic quality—relevancy, efficiency or usefulness—of the models, tools or theories exported by the centre, but rather the authority and power which accompany this process” (*ibid.*:198).

- By the time researchers of periphery-origin have matured in their training, they start regarding traditional ('old') concepts of and thinking about translation and translating found in their own cultures as 'inferior', 'useless', 'simplistic' or 'irrelevant', and put them aside in favour of translation theory in its 'modern' and 'Western' sense.

- These researchers are ‘educated away’ from their own culture and society. (Susam-Sarajeva 2002: 199)
- “self-colonization” (*Ibid.*:198)

A Polysystemist's Response to Prescriptive Cultural Relativism and Postcolonialism

- **Abstract:** Translation studies and other disciplines in the humanities have become increasingly politicized as scholars act on the presumption that the dominance of Western theories is the result of power differentials rather than academic merit.

- This postcolonialist mindset is based on the claim that cultures are equally valid, but there are objective and cross-culturally intersubjective standards for comparing certain aspects of cultures. The problems with such prescriptive cultural relativism are that the nation-state is regarded as the only legitimate unit of culture, that national differences are over-emphasized, and that an “is” is turned into an “ought.”

- Built on these misconceptions, postcolonialism challenges the political establishment in central countries but serves as an excuse to suppress the demand for progress from peripheral sectors in peripheral cultures. The attempt to export postcolonialism, a culture-specific theory, to the whole world is thus itself a colonialist act.

- cultures are equally valid (patterns of life)

- If Culture A, of its own accord, borrows repertoires on a large scale from Culture B, it can be inferred that Culture A feels itself to be inferior to, or less valid than, Culture B. The principle of equal validity must lead to the conclusion that Culture A is wrong in feeling itself to be less valid, and thus ends up criticizing Culture A as being not quite valid for feeling itself to be less valid.

- Alternately, one would have to agree that Culture A is really less valid. A case in point is translation studies in present-day China, where the majority of scholars welcome or accept the domination of Western theories (see Chang 2009; 2015).

Comments from a referee for *Target*:

- It's unfortunate that the author had to drag the serious and well-founded polysystem theory through the mud (i.e. using a serious theory—polysystem theory—as a pretext for writing an emotional rather than a scientific text)

- The author of this article must be suffering from “white anxiety”, and should perhaps begin the “Tea Party” of Translation Studies.

- On the Chinese mainland, translation research and the establishment of translation as an academic discipline have taken a big step forward in recent years.

Evaluation of the impact of Western theories

- The main trend has been to set up a new system of knowledge by introducing contemporary Western translation theories through translation, in order to *free translation scholars from the fetters of the concept of 'xin-da-ya' in traditional translation theory*. (Cheung 2009a, 27; my translation; italics added)

- 张佩瑶。2009。钱钟书对翻译概念的阐释及其对翻译研究的启示。《中国翻译》5，27-32：
- 在内地，翻译研究及翻译学科建设近年也有了长足发展，其主要趋势是通过翻译引介当代西方翻译理论，从而建立新的知识体系，以帮助翻译学学者摆脱传统译论中“信、达、雅”概念的束缚。

- [T]he apparent “semi-silence” on the part of some non-Western scholars (at least in the literature available in *European* languages) in relation to the field’s neglect of non-mainstream traditions might reflect not only a **drifting away from their cultural and intellectual predecessors,**

- **but also an internalization of Western norms and perceptions (including that of Western superiority) and a concomitant aspiration to emulate the mainstream.**
(Wakabayashi 2014, 102)

Teaching is yet another vehicle for the spread of Western ideas about translation across the world, because instructional materials for professional translators are often based on resources developed in Western contexts.

- Here the role of Eugene Nida's work in translator training in China, or the Arabic textbooks in Iraq based on the work of Peter Newmark, stand as examples. (Tymoczko 2009: 405)

- the English word ‘translation’ “suggests a carrying across, indicating that the relationship between text and translation should be a strong form of equivalence, a type of identity relationship rather than a similarity relationship which entails difference” (Tymoczko 2006:23)

- the definition of translation in the Eurocentric tradition is too narrow to be of any use for non-Western data (Wakabayashi 2005: 61; Tymoczko 2006:13).

Definition of *fanyi* 翻譯

- 赞宁 (919-1001):
- 翻也者，如翻锦绮，背面俱花，但其花有左右不同耳
- “The meaning of ‘*fan*’ could be conveyed by likening it to turning over a piece of brocade—on both sides **the patterns are the same, only they face opposite directions.**” (Cheung 2006:177)

- Cheung, Martha. 2006. *An anthology of Chinese discourse on translation*, Vol.1. Manchester: St. Jerome.

Tymoczko

- The concept *fanyi* is linked to the image of embroidery: if the source text is the front side of an embroidered work, the target text can be thought of as the back side of the same piece.

- Like the reverse of an embroidery—which typically in **modern Chinese handwork** has hanging threads, loose ends and even **variations in patterning** from the front—a translation in this conceptualization is viewed as **different from the original** and is not expected to be equivalent in all respects. (Tymoczko 2007:72)

Gentzler:

- Martha Cheung suggests that the concept *fanyi* involves two sides of the same coin/leaf/embroidery and so posits **translation as both front and back**, yet facing in opposite directions (Cheung 2006: 177; see Tymoczko 2007: 72).

- When considering translation in the Americas, first as colonies then later as independent nations, **this concept of neither one nor the other (source or target) but simultaneously both, translationally interdependent**, is of increasing relevance. (Gentzler 2011:125)

Qian Zhongshu (1910-1998):

- Zan deems it acceptable for a translation to be inferior to the original just as the back side of a brocade is to the front side, because Zan is mainly concerned with the translation of theoretical works, in which the retention of the original's form and style is not as important as it is in literary translation (Qian Zhongshu 1981, 20).

- 钱钟书：赞宁主要在讲理论著作的翻译，原来形式和风格的保持不像在文学翻译里面那么重要；锦绣的反面虽比正面逊色，走样还不厉害，所以他认为过得去。
- 钱钟书·林纾的翻译[A]，罗新璋·翻译论集[c]·北京：商务印书馆，1984·
P.697

- a translated text and its source text are the same in content, but different in form (*Encyclopedia of China* Editorial Board 1988, 70).

- 《中国大百科全书》语言文字卷：
- “这个生动的比喻，说明翻译是一种艺术(如翻锦绣)，它将(语言的)形式加以改变(左右不同)，而内容不变(背面俱花)”
(p70)
- 中国大百科全书编委会·语言文字[c]，
中国大百科全书[c]·北京，上海：中国
大百科全书出版社，1988

- Tymoczko is concerned that Westernization of translation studies in the non-West has posed a threat to diversity:
 - The de-Westernization and enlargement of translation and of translation studies that I am arguing for here can be thought of in terms of biodiversity. [...]

- The survival value for human beings of retaining diverse ideas and practices of translation that have evolved over thousands of years in different human cultures should be obvious. (Tymoczko 2009, 417)

- However, the concern of Chinese scholars who resist Westernization is exactly the opposite: that the process has put an end to uniformity and led to confusion.

- The goal of traditional translation studies in China was to establish a “unanimously accepted” set of criteria “for translators to abide by,” whether it be Yan Fu’s ‘*xin-da-ya*’ or any other set (Fan 1992, 155).

- But the influx of foreign theories, the conservatives argue, by dethroning Yan Fu's theory, has brought Chinese discourse on translation "from a state where there was an authority to a state where there is none," resulting in "a retrogression" (Zhang Jinghao 2006, 60).

- The dethroning of Yan Fu's '*xin-da-ya*' by Western theories marks the beginning of intra-cultural diversity in translation studies in China, but it may, paradoxically, have reduced inter-cultural diversity by making translation studies in China more similar to that in the West. The concern for diversity on a global scale is therefore not entirely causeless.

- However, to ask non-Western cultures to resist Westernization in the name of global diversity may be compared to industrialized, developed countries asking less developed agricultural countries to refrain from modernization for the sake of international division of labor. It is, in the end, Eurocentric (and selfish).

Reverse ethnocentrism

- The West connotes all those who evince allegiance to the Eurocentric worldview (including Western-trained non-Western scholars who eagerly advance European universalism for their scholarly productivity),

- and the East connotes all those who see merit in the Oriental worldview (including Western scholars who strive to replace Eurocentrism with universal universalism). (Gunaratne 2009, 376)

- The West =Eurocentrism = European universalism
- The East = universal universalism

- non-Western scholars who advance Western ideologies or academic theories but who are not “Western-trained,” such as the majority of translation scholars in China, have apparently no position in the scheme.

- This statement has been quoted by a translation scholar (Wakabayashi; quoted in Doorslaer 2011, 227), indicating that reverse ethnocentrism may have impacted translation studies.

- Thus, the uncritical dissemination and adoption of Western translation norms and practices in other parts of the globe becomes highly problematic; it is a prime example of a **hegemonic form of knowledge**. (Tymoczko 2007: 77)

- *The Translator* 2009:2
- “Chinese Discourses on Translation: Positions and Perspectives” (edited by Martha Cheung)
- Four articles touch on Eurocentrism:
 - Maria Tymoczko
 - 3 scholars of Chinese origin

- These three are more wary about Sinocentrism (Chang 2009; Tan 2009; Guo 2009)

- The concern about Eurocentrism might itself be Eurocentric

Thank you!

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