A Study of Chinese Translation of Academic Works in English: A Panorama in China

Keyong He & Yuanyuan Chen
Minzu University of China (China)

Abstract
The past 32 years since 1979 witnessed a dramatic thriving of translation into Chinese from foreign languages. Such translation marks the third peak of translation waves in the Chinese translation history. Much of the translation has been on academic topics, and English has been the major source of source languages. Along with the influx of foreign works, quality of translation has increasingly become a concern in the academic community. What is the general situation now? A statistical and analytical review is presented of the current status of Chinese translation of academic works in English in China, aiming at raising the immediate awareness of translation quality on the part of Chinese professionals concerned, including translators, publishers and scholars.

Keywords: translation quality, academic works in English, mistranslation.

1. Introduction

The foreign-Chinese translation wave in China since 1979 is the third one if the translation wave in the Tang Dynasty is regarded as the first and the one at the turn of the twentieth century as the second. The third wave is the biggest in terms of people involved in translation, the quantity of translation publication, and diversity of disciplines and subjects covered. The overwhelming majority of such translation is from foreign languages into Chinese. The exact figure of published translations for the past 30 years is not available. Some incomplete statistics, however, would present an incomprehensive but a general picture. Statistics¹ shows that from 1978 to 1990, 28,500 titles of translated books were published, and from 1996 to 2006, 120,750 titles of newly-translated books were published, excluding the number of those re-translated and the books with more than one version. Li Jingduan (2009) estimates that averagely around 15,000 titles of translated books have been published annually since 2000, which is over 50% more than the annual average in the 1990s. According to Huan Youyi (2010), by 2009, there were 19,520 registered professional translation enterprises but 15,039 are in actual operation, with a total of around 60,000 professional translators and interpreters. In addition, some 500,000 people are involved in part-time translation.
With such a big population involved in translation and with such a large quantity of annual publication, translation quality is inevitably a concern. Since 1984, the concern and worry about translation quality have been expressed by Chinese translators such as Jiang Chunfang (1984), Ye Shuifu (1989) and Ji Xianlin (1998). In 2002, twelve leading Chinese translators headed by Ji Xianlin jointly made a public appeal through *Guanming Daily* to enhance translation quality by observing translation ethics. Despite the efforts, negative criticism in recent years seems to have increased. Since 2001, the most influential newspapers in China like *Remin Ribao* (the People’s Daily), *Guanming Daily*, China Education Daily, China Reading Weekly and Wenhui Book Review have mounted attacks on poor quality in the contemporary Chinese translation of foreign works, particularly of academic works. It seems that such criticism has never stopped. Consequently, the following questions need to be addressed: Does the quality issue become better or worse with the change of times? Is the issue salient only in some disciplines or is it prevalent in all disciplines? What is the general picture of the quality of Chinese translation of academic works in English? There has never been any systematic study in this connection. Since the majority of the translation is from English, a study of the criticism of Chinese translation of works in English would provide a representative look. While it is impractical and impossible to look at translation of all kinds in all areas, it is more meaningful and manageable to study only the Chinese translation of academic works in English. Therefore, the present research attempts to make a systematic study of criticism of the quality publicly expressed during the past 32 years to present a panorama.

Being positivistic and descriptive, the present study statistically analyses all academic papers and articles that are possibly available on the quality of Chinese translation of academic works in English and that have been published during the past 30 years in Mainland China. Chinese Journal Full-text Database and China Academic Journal Network Publishing Database are the major databases that collect practically all academic papers published from 1979 up to now by all Chinese academic journals and important Chinese newspapers, Ph.D. dissertations and excellent master-degree dissertations, and papers presented in important academic conferences in China. The present research is based on the data from the two databases.

2. Discussion

To get a holistic picture, it is necessary to obtain data that could indicate the attention given to the quality issue in Chinese translation of academic works in English, the data that could indicate the academic areas affected by quality issue, and the data that could show general situation of specific translation