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**To cite this article:** Tianzhen Xie (2017) Medio-translatology: New Perspectives on Comparative Literature and Translation Studies, *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 1:1, 125-133, DOI: [10.1080/25723618.2017.1339513](https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2017.1339513)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2017.1339513>



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Published online: 01 Aug 2017.



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# Medio-translatology: New Perspectives on Comparative Literature and Translation Studies

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## ABSTRACT

Medio-translatology (译介学) is a young discipline that has added to the scope of comparative literature, translation studies, and even China's modern and contemporary literary studies. As one of the few original translation theories proposed by Chinese academics, it is shaping and changing the course of translation studies in China and holds great potential for further academic research. In this paper, Professor Xie Tianzhen, founder of Medio-translatology, elaborates on the theoretical basis and essential concepts of this new discipline and provides an in-depth analysis of the nature of translated literature, as well as the relationship between literary translation and translated literature, and between the history of translated literature and that of literary translation.

## 摘要

译介学作为一门新兴学科, 扩大了比较文学、翻译学甚至中国现当代文学研究的范围。作为由中国学术界提出的为数不多创新翻译理论之一, 译介学正在改变与重塑中国翻译研究的发展道路, 并具有强大的学术研究潜力。本文中, 译介学提出者谢天振教授, 阐述了这一新兴学科的理论基础和主要概念, 深入分析了翻译文学的本质、文学翻译与翻译文学之间的关系以及翻译文学史与文学翻译史之间的关系。

## KEYWORDS

Medio-translatology; translated literature; literary translation; history of translated literature; history of literary translation

## 关键词

译介学; 翻译文学; 文学翻译; 翻译文学史; 文学翻译史

## 1. Origin of medio-translatology

I took a liking to literary translation very early on, but started working on translation studies only some two decades ago. In the mid-1980s, a debate on remapping literary history in China was launched by Professor Chen Sihe (陈思和) and Professor Wang Xiaoming (王晓明), both Shanghai-based scholars. The focus was on rewriting the history of contemporary Chinese literature. Intrigued by this debate, I wrote an article titled “Finding a Home for an Outcast: on the Role of Translated Literature in the History of modern Chinese Literature”(为弃儿寻找归宿 – 论翻译在中国现代文学史上的地位), suggesting that translated literature deserved a place in Chinese literature.

The article attracted the attention of the media, which immediately disseminated my view. Meanwhile, doubt was cast on my opinion by some scholars, who argued that “works by foreign writers should not be regarded as Chinese just because they were rendered into the Chinese language by translators.”

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Meanwhile, I observed some baffling phenomena in translation circles, particularly regarding literary translation, and I thought them over. One example was the stigmatization of Zhao Jingshen's (赵景深) rendering of "Milky Way" into something meaning "a milk-soaked path" since Lu Xun's (鲁迅) railing against it half a century before. I compared the original text with Zhao's translation and found that his rendering in fact fitted the context much better than what is now widely accepted as appropriate. However, I urgently needed a theoretical backing to right the wrongs done to Zhao and to offer fresh looks at such phenomena.

This sense of urgency sent me searching for explanations from a different perspective, and this pretty much marked the beginning of my research into Medio-translatology.

## 2. About "creative treason"

"Creative treason" was actually coined by the French literary sociologist Robert Escarpit in his book *Sociologie de La Littérature* (*The Sociology of Literature*) (1987, p. 137). "If you are receptive to the idea that translation is always creative treason, then you may have a solution to the intriguing problem of translation. To hold that translation is treason is due to the fact that the original work is put into an unexpected reference system (language); and that translation is also creative means that the original work is given a new look and comes into contact with new readers; translation gives the original work a second life..." he wrote.

I resonated strongly with Robert Escarpit; I believed that "creative treason" revealed the essence of translation, especially literary translation. Nevertheless, Escarpit might have looked beyond the linguistic level when he created this term to sum up the nature of translation. The term should also have been applied to the cross-cultural side of translation. For this reason, I further expanded the scope of its application to explain numerous glaring cases of "treason" in literary translation that reflected barriers, collisions, misunderstandings, and distortions existing in cross-cultural communication.

In my books *Medio-Translatology* (译介学) and *New Perspectives in Translation Studies* (翻译研究新视野), I firstly made a detailed analysis of many cases of "creative treason" by translators. I divided them into four major categories, namely personalized translation, errors and omissions, abridged translation and trans-editing, and relay-translation and adaptation. I then pointed out that "creative treason" was not only committed by the translator; in fact, the target readership and target culture also played an indispensable role in making the treason happen—they, together with the translator, made it possible for *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, a serious political satire in England, to become an easy read for children, and elevated the lesser-known *Gadfly* by Irish writer Ethel Voynich to the status of a foreign classic in China.

"Creative treason" in literary translation was the foundation and starting point of my research into Medio-translatology. Thanks to "creative treason," translated literature is not the same as foreign literature and deserves a due place in the target culture. My writings on translated literature are all based on this view.

## 3. Research into translated literature and its national identity

For a long time, translated literature was not recognized as an integral part of national literature of the target culture, but as part of foreign literature, on the grounds that literary

translation was merely a code-switching process between two languages. This was obviously an over-simplification of the complexity of literary translation, and as a result, blurred the nature of translated literature and its significance and place in the literary history of a target culture, and dismissed the contribution of the translator to literature. This is why no dictionary ever had an entry called “translated literature,” until Japan’s *Comparative Literature Dictionary* of the 1970s included one. It was only after Medio-translatology gained traction that translated literature was afforded academic value and established as an academic term.

Translated literature was known to be stuck in a neither-fish-nor-fowl awkward position in traditional translation and literature studies. Translation scholars only focused on its linguistic understanding but not its literary status. Literary scholars recognized its contribution to the target culture and literature, but were slow to define its place. In most cases, they believed that it was a product of foreign literature, but the idea of translated literature being an independent system never crossed their minds. For this reason, even in China, where translated literature flourished for a good part of the twentieth century, no works on modern Chinese literature ever gave it a place. In literature export nations, things are even worse. For all the French novels Fu Lei (傅雷) translated into Chinese, French literature would not even recognize Fu Lei’s existence. Nor would be the famed Chinese translators of Shakespeare’s plays Zhu Shenghao (朱生豪) and Liang Shih-chiu (梁实秋) in English literature. It seemed that translated literature was an “outcast” wandering in the literature world.

Literature translation may be regarded as merely a code-switching process by the linguistic or traditional translation studies schools, but when examined through the prism of literary studies and Medio-translatology, a long-neglected, commendable aspect should become discernible: it is both a means of literary creation, and an existential form of literary work. In this sense, literary translation and translated literature both deserve recognition for their relatively independent artistic value.

In my argument for this point, I noted that a literary work could have many different forms. Generally speaking, a work takes on its earliest literary form the moment it is created. For instance, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* started out as a play. Nevertheless, this early form did not preclude the possibility of its morphing into other genres through adaptation and rewriting at the hands of other writers. Charles and Mary Lamb’s *Hamlet* is prose, and there have been different versions of *Hamlet* movies since the introduction of moving pictures in the early twentieth century. Likewise, *A Dream in Red Mansions* has also taken on a life of its own since its birth as a novel by Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹): it has been taken onto the stage as an opera akin to the Shaoxing Opera and Suzhou-style story-telling and ballad-singing; later, it has been adapted to movies and TV series as well.

Then, I made a comparison of literary translations and adaptations. I believed that adaptations could give literary works a new lease of life. The greater a work, the more diversified literary forms it can take on, as it is more easily adapted. This is exactly the case with some of the world’s literary masterpieces. They have the right combination—powerful, complex characters; profound themes; and well-thought out plots—for a multipronged examination using varied creative forms, hence the different adaptations in other literary genres. The reputation and status of the original only works in the new forms’ favor, making success as a new literary creation easily attainable.

A rough comparison of adaptations with translations reveals striking similarities. If adaptations are about changing the literary form of the original, as in the case of movie

adaptations of a novel or play-turned-prose, then translations are about altering the linguistic representation of the original. Among other similarities, both are based on an original, and both are products of purposeful acts, that is, disseminating and introducing the original, especially literary classics and masterpieces, to a wider audience.

That said, there is a fundamental difference between them. Adaptations introduce the original to a new literary sphere, but are targeted at an audience in the same culture that may overlap that of the original, or who may just have a slightly different educational background or aesthetic taste. Take again *A Dream in Red Mansions*. The reader of the original novel and the audience of its Shaoxing Opera version are from the same Chinese culture. In contrast, its translations are appreciated by readers from foreign cultures, whose customs and traditions may be distinct from the average Chinese reader's, and whose literary tastes and reading habits are essentially different as well. So it is with the Chinese translations of Shakespeare's plays. "Giving the original work a second life," as noted by Robert Escarpit (p. 139), translations indeed play a more important role in the development of literature than adaptations.

If we peruse the history of the world's civilizations, we can see that almost every nation has some outstanding literary works that have been kept alive or made known to the world thanks to their translations. Homer's epics *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, Aeschylus and Sophocles' tragedies and comedies, as well as works by Aristotle and Virgil, were all written in Ancient Greek and Latin, now dead languages. Without translations in English and other languages, they could have been lost to history. Works written in rarer, or less widely spoken languages, provide an especially convincing case. Just imagine how Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz, American Jewish writer Isaac Singer who wrote in Yiddish, and Columbian writer Marquez, known for *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, would have fared, if it had not been for the translations of their works. In all likelihood, their work would have remained unknown by the rest of the world, and they could never have become the world-class literary award-winners that they were.

In fact, many of the world's literary classics exist and are circulated, known, accepted, and studied by a global audience in the form of translations. Examples include surviving ancient Greek and Roman classics, and works written in smaller languages, such as Ibsen's plays and Andersen's fairy tales. In some countries, translations have saved some great works from the fate of oblivion among the author's fellow countrymen. Thomas Moore's *Utopia* was written in Latin and was only known to the English audience after it was translated into English. The poems of the Finnish poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg, one of the founding fathers of Finland's modern literature, were originally written in Swedish and were introduced to his Finnish compatriots by translators.

However, it proved a lot easier to find a nodding audience for the parallel between translations and adaptation of an original work than for categorizing translated literature, or the collective name of a large number of literary translations, as part of a nation's own literature. At the heart of the differences of opinion lies one question: is translated literature native or foreign? In other words, are translated literary works part of a nation's literature? Or in the case of Chinese literature, is translated literature a part of it?

For example, questions like these can be seen in newspapers and academic journals: "Can foreign works translated into Chinese be considered 'Chinese literature'?" "How come translated literature is counted as literary work by Chinese author? Does it also mean that, once translated into Chinese, British plays, French novels, Greek drama and

Japanese haiku will all automatically be granted a ‘Chinese citizenship’ and become native? ” (Wang, 1995, p. 12) Some have even advocated that: “Creative writing is writing. Translation is translation. They are two different things.” “There is not a single literature history book that will include translated foreign literature works into the literature of its own nation” (Shi, 1995, p. 27) .It is worthy of attention that in the above-mentioned argumentations, the term of “translated literature” sometimes is deliberately avoided and replaced by a more vaguely defined concept of “foreign works translated into Chinese,” From this, we can see that they believe translated literature equals to foreign literature. Or more exactly, in their eyes, the concept of “translated literature” simply doesn’t exist. However, between these two concepts lies a world of difference in terms of their scope of application: “translated literature” refers to the portion of “foreign works translated into Chinese” confined to literature and the arts, while “foreign works translated into Chinese” represents a much wider breadth, ranging from the above mentioned literary works, to theoretical criticisms of literature, from all types of translated social science works on philosophy, economics, sociology, anthropology etc., even to translated natural science works. A slight change of words has resulted in a tremendous expansion of definition.

The confused conception of translated literature is, of course, generally harmless, if a part merely of normal life. But when it prevails in the academic community, the consequences can be severe. First, it will wipe out people’s appreciation for translators’ efforts—since they are considered as foreign literature works, it is of course the foreign writers who should earn all the credit; what translators do is nothing more than technically transferring the texts from one language to another, so they might as well be called “craftsmen.” Secondly, it makes the compilation of literature history of a nation a tricky and confusing task: Do translated literature have a niche in the literature history (in this case the history of Chinese literature)? As for the vast ocean of translated literature works and the countless literary translators who have devoted heart and soul to their undertakings, on what kind of position do they stand?

To solve this puzzle, two pivotal issues are considered: first, the difference between literary translation and non-literary translation and second, the criterion to determine the identity of a certain literary work.

It is widely acknowledged that there is a significant difference in essence between literary translation and non-literary translation. Literary translation belongs to the realm of the arts, while non-literary translation does not. The latter includes translated works on subject matters like philosophy and economics, and also the translation of Buddhist scriptures. Its chief value lies in transmitting the information (theories, points of views, academic arguments and ideas etc.) expressed in the source texts in an accurate and faithful manner. As long as the translation manages to do this, it has served its purpose. Here, one point must be emphasized: the information (theories, points of views, academic arguments and ideas etc.) transmitted into the target language retains its original nature.

Yet literary translation is different—not only does it transmit basic information, it also conveys the aesthetic qualities of the source texts. If we say the basic information (theories, points of views, academic arguments, ideas, as well as facts and data) in non-literary works is a relatively limited and stable “variable,” then the aesthetic information contained in literary works, which go beyond basic information like storylines and plots, is quite a boundless or even elusive “variable.” Furthermore, literary works of high quality tend to be a treasure trove of rich aesthetic information and provide readers

with infinite possibilities for interpretation (particularly true of poetry translation). As such, translators have to exert themselves at the utmost in using their skills and talents, trying to “dig deeply into the gold mine.” If they are satisfied with merely transmitting the general information of the source texts and do not unleash their artistic creativity, then it is impossible for them to produce any translated works with artistic charm and offer the readers any enjoyable reading experience. Therefore, if art creation is an “artistic processing” of reality by a writer or poet, then literary translation is also an “artistic processing” of the original foreign literary work. I believe it is for this reason that Feng Minghui (冯明惠), a scholar from Taiwan, once said: “A good piece of translation is a metem-psychosis of a literary work...A competent translator is responsible for compensating for the limitedness of literary works in this circumstance and gives a new life to the author of the original texts.”(1978, p. 145)

The next puzzle to solve is the way to determine the “nationality” of literary works. Only researchers of translated literature will be challenged by this question. The issue is also a new one, since old-school literature researchers usually restrict their study to native literature of a certain nation. In this case, the question under scrutiny is clear-cut and there is no need for any further consideration. But even so, puzzles still exist: when people are compiling histories of Chinese literature, why choose Lu Xun and Mao Dun but not Maxim Gorky and Pearl S. Buck? Is it because of the language used in the original writing? Obviously not, otherwise all the authors writing in English would have been counted as British or American authors. Is it because of the subjects they deal with? Again, no. Or else Pearl S. Buck would have been seen as a Chinese author. The only applicable criterion here, as I see it, is the nationality of the authors involved.

The next questions concerns the authorship of a certain translation of a work of literature. Leafing through the Chinese version of *le Père Goriot*, the answer comes immediately: “The author is Balzac!” In fact, an answer like this completely ignores the existence of the translator, since Balzac simply didn’t write in Chinese. What we are really reading is a book created by a translator named Fu Lei based on the original French texts written by Balzac. Therefore, strictly speaking, the author of a translated literary work is its translator. In light of this, it is not difficult to then determine the identity translations of literary works by nationality of the translator.

#### 4. Research into the history of translated literature and the history of literary translation

Now a place has been found for translated literature, but it is still distinct from native literature. This paper proposes that translated literature into Chinese is a part of Chinese literature, but at the same time, it should be regarded as a relatively independent component. Hence, there arises the issue of the compilation of the history of translated literature.

To distinguish between the history of translated literature and the history of literary translation is one of the most important topics in my Medio-translatology studies. The attempt to explore this topic has also opened up a broader horizon for translation studies.

My initial inspiration came from the existing works on the history of translated literature published in China. I found that academia is seemingly unaware of the difference between the history of translated literature and the history of literary



translation. However, I believe that they are two different concepts. Some of the published books on relevant topics mainly record literary translation activities, yet strictly speaking, they are not dealing with the history of translated literature, but merely the history of literary translation. The latter mainly focuses on picking up the chronological thread of translation activities through history. The history of translated literature, however, is more than that. Not only does it observe chronological events, but also focuses on the cultural space in which the translation events occur, the purpose of the translators' translating behavior at the literary and cultural level, and the foreign authors who have made their presence felt in Chinese literary circles. In sum, the history of translated literature examines translated literature in a specific time and space, elaborates on its cultural purpose, ideology, the strategies applied to reach this purpose and the ultimate effect of the translated works, and finally explores the relationship between translated literature and native literature over a specific time span and its significance.

History of translated literature is, in essence, a type of literature history. Therefore, it should also embody the three fundamental elements of literature history, that is, the authors (in this case translators and writers), works (translated works) and events (not only literary translation events, but also the transmission, acceptance and influence of the translated literary works in the target language environment). It is the mandate for researchers studying the history of translated literature to describe and analyze the historical activities spun off from these three core factors, which means that they should not only illustrate the general features, historical evolution, and characteristics of literary translation, but also make a clear definition and explanation on how the target language literature ambience has helped to shape the creation of translated literature.

The autonomy of translators and the recognition of their deserved positions form an important part in the history of translated literature. In the twentieth century, China has seen a lineup of exceptional translators, such as Lin Shu (林纾), Su Manshu (苏曼殊), Ma Junwu (马君武), Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren (周作人), Guo Moruo (郭沫若), Mao Dun (茅盾), Ba Jin (巴金), Fu Donghua (傅东华), Zhu Shenghao, Fu Lei, and Liang Shih-chiu. The translation activities they conducted have brought something new to China's history of translated literature and presented Chinese readers with a vivid literature landscape.

Another type of subjects in the history of translated literature is those "foreign authors disguised in Chinese clothing." Or instead of "subjects" I should call them an object of study worthy of attention. They are the ones who have provided the source of translated literature. Therefore, one can never present the whole picture of the developments and achievements of the history of translated literature without giving an adequate description and analysis of the transmission and reception of these authors' works in China, including their initial introduction into the country, their publication, and reader response over different periods of time. Some literary works were introduced into China wearing the laurel wreath of world literature classics, while some were imported to cater to specific cultural and literary needs, serving as a support for a shift into new literary concepts or writing techniques (e.g., the translation of modernistic literature during 1980s and 1990s). Also, some foreign authors have undergone a change of image as they made their way into China. Bryon was initially known by the Chinese people as a brave and gallant fighter against the feudal system; Shakespeare



gained his fame as a sophisticated playwright; Rousseau was the personification of wisdom, intellect and virtues; and Nietzsche was portrayed as a fervent supporter of individualism and the ultimate idol destroyer.

A key component of the history of translated literature is to explore how the translated literature works are transmitted, received, and studied in the target culture, and how they wield their influence. Thus, it will serve as a well-sourced and valuable historical reference for today's increasingly complex network of literature works and cultural exchanges. Goethe once emphasized that the relations between two nations can be best reflected by the relations between the source texts and translations in their languages. The history of translated literature is of a special, blending nature—it is in fact also a history of exchange, impact, and reception of literature.

It must be clarified, however, that it is by no means a disparaging remark to say that a certain book is about the history of literary translation rather than the history of translated literature. They both have their respective functions, values, and significance and are complementary to each other. I myself have been working on both subjects at the same time in cooperation with my friends. For example, in recent years, Mr. Zha Mingjian(查明建) and I have published *A History of Translated Literature in Modern China (1898–1949)* (中国现代翻译文学史[1898—1949]) or and *A History of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Foreign Literary Translation in China (the first & second volumes)* (中国20世纪外国文学翻译史[上、下册]) or *A History of Translated Literature in Contemporary China (1950–2000)*(中国当代翻译文学史[1950 – 2000]) we are currently working on.

## 5. Medio-translatology studies and shifts in focus of translation studies

Based on the above discussion, it is not difficult to see that Medio-translatology Studies have ventured beyond the realm of traditional translation studies, in that they have adopted a much broader academic perspective, not merely restricted to the specific issue of transfer between two languages, but also include elements of literature studies and cultural studies.

When one goes beyond the traditional focus on texts, one begins to research at the cultural level. In this way, Medio-translatology Studies coincide with the two major trends sweeping academic communities globally—the cultural turn in translation studies and the translation turn in cultural studies. A series of western literary and cultural theories, ranging from hermeneutics, deconstruction theories, and polysystem theories to feminist theories and post-colonial theories, are now aptly applicable to translation studies, thus significantly expanding its future potential.

No further elaboration will be given here on the fusion between cultural theories and translation studies, but I want to emphasize one thing: if we want to continue to push forward the forefront of translation studies, a fundamental shift of research focus must take place. As explained in my article “On the Modernization of the Concept of Translation Studies” published in *Chinese Translators Journal* (vol.1, 2004), we have ushered in a brand new era, where religious classics, literary works, and books on social science are no longer the major players in the translation arena. Obviously, the traditional conception of translation (i.e., faithful translation is the best translation) fails to explain many of today's phenomena. The translation of Coca Cola into “可口可乐” (literally “tasty and happy” in Chinese) is an example. Though the source text contains

no information about “tasty” or “happy,” “可口可乐” is still widely recognized as a good translation. These phenomena serve as a wake-up call—it is time for us to make an adjustment in our conception of translation.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Tianzhen Xie** is professor of Graduate Institute of Interpretation and Translation, Shanghai International Studies University. He serves as super advisor of Chinese Comparative literature Association and serves as editor for *Comparative Literature in China* under CCLA. His academic interests cover translation studies and comparative literature.

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