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Exploring the Global Historical Approach to Regional Translation History: A Proposal for Guangdong Translation History in the Late Qing Dynasty

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Abstract

In the late Qing Dynasty, Guangdong was the earliest place in China to experience the baptism of western civilization, with a glorious history of translation and a multitude of famous translators. The translation history of Guangdong in the late Qing Dynasty is not only a regional translation history, but also a microcosm of "western learning spreading to the east" from the global perspective. On the basis of briefly describing the Guangdong translation history in the late Qing Dynasty, this paper introduces a global historical perspective with the aim of proposing a conceptual framework for researching Guangdong translation history in the late Qing Dynasty. It is found that writing a regional translation history requires both knowledge archaeology and regional historical methods, more importantly, a global historical approach is conducive to forming a comprehensive and profound understanding of translation history and the interaction between regional translation history and global history.

Keywords

Global Historical Approach; Regional Translation History; Guangdong Translation History

1. Introduction

As is well known, translation is an important means to promote the mutual learning among civilizations. Since the turn of the millennium, the study of translators and the social nature of translation has taken center stage in translation studies research (Munday, 2016, p. 236). The study of translation history, which focuses translators studies, has increasingly become a prominent research field, especially in China. In modern China, Guangdong was the earliest place in China to contact with the western civilization, with many well-known translators emerging and forming a colorful picture of translation history. In the late Qing Dynasty, Guangdong boosted many active translation activities, for example, the translation activities led by Lin Zexu, the translation activities of missionaries in Guangdong, the translation activities of "Young Children Studying in the U.S.", Liang Qichao's thought on strengthening the nation via translation (He & Hou, 2023, p. 53), the indirect translation activities from Japanese, and initiating the translation of Marxism by Zhu Zhixin. The above examples should not be treated as the isolated translation events, and global historical approach is much more applicable to research the interaction between regional translation history and global history. The global historical approach (or perspective) is a new historical compilation theory with a strong sense of

the times, with focusing on the inter-relations and inter-influences between historical events that have had significant impacts on the course of human history. Some scholars had taken global historical approach into the research field of translation history (Huang, 2022; Roig-Sanz, 2022; Lan & Huang, 2023). Without doubt, writing the regional translation history should first take time, space, and translators as clues to do seriously knowledge archaeology (1) and adopt the regional historical methods. And the global historical approach provides a global historical perspective for researching the regional translation history, the spatial turn of portals of globalization, and research method for global micro history.

2. A Brief Introduction to Guangdong Translation History in the late Qing Dynasty

China is vast in territory, and the translators in history is as brilliant as stars. However, the geographical distribution of the translators is uneven, but follows certain patterns (Niu & Xu, 2023, p. 81). In the viewpoint of Gao Min and He Aijun (2018, p. 60), the birthplaces of native translators were presented in a "crescent shape" along the southeast coastal areas. This means that the translation histories of southeast coastal provinces such as Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong are the most fascinating parts in modern Chinese translation history. In the late Qing Dynasty, Guangdong was a place of "enlightenment pioneers and revolutionary cradle", with numerous renowned translators emerging. Guangdong translation history in the late Qing Dynasty occupies an important position in China translation history, and its significance is self-evident.

What are the core tasks in researching translation history? Pym's book *Method in Translation History* had given the answer: translation history should explain why translations were produced in a particular social time and place; the central object should be the human translator (1998, p. ix). Therefore, we can define the mission of translation history simply as "to explain why translations were produced by translators in a particular social time and place?" In China, many scholars also hold the similar views such as He Aijun (2022), Niu Rongliang (2023) and Han Hui (2024). In the following text, Guangdong translation history in the late Qing Dynasty will be briefly investigated from three aspects: time, place, and translators.

2.1 Time Clue

According to Li Wei's monograph *A History of Translation in Modern China* (2005), the translation history in the late Qing Dynasty were divided into four stages: translation during the Opium War, translation during the Westernization Movement, Translation Influenced by the Reform Movement of 1898, and Translation during the Revolution of 1911. In these four stages, obviously, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 can served as a historical boundary line. Before this boundary line (the former two stages), the translation theme mainly involved western science and technology; after it (the latter two stages), however, the focus shifted to social sciences and literature (Niu & Xu, 2025, p. 71). Guangdong translation history in the late Qing Dynasty also can be roughly divided into four stages. In the first stage, the translation activities mainly led by two groups: scholar-bureaucrats such as Lin Zexun and Liang Tingnan, and western missionaries such as Robert Morrison and James Legge. In the second stage, the emerging translators were "Young Children Studying in the U.S." led by Yung Wing. In the third stage, the translation activities mainly led by reform leaders such as Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao and Rong Shangqin. In the fourth stage, the translation activities mainly included revolution translations and novel translations such as the revolution translations of Feng Ziyou and Zhu Zhixin, and Liang Qichao's novel circle revolution.

2.2 Place Clue

Place clue refers to the geographical distribution of translation history and translators. In the late Qing Dynasty, the native Guangdong translators mainly came from Guangfu Area (Guangzhou Prefecture) and the most active place for translation activities in Guangdong is also in Guangfu Area. In the Qing Dynasty, Guangzhou Prefecture City was the capital of Guangdong Province and served as the office city for the Governor General of Guangdong and Guangxi (Niu & Xu, 2025, p. 73), with administering 14 counties. Among them, Xiangshan County (today's Zhuhai and Zhongshan) contributed the largest numbers of translators of Guangdong, and Guangzhou Prefecture city (including Nanhai County and Panyu County) was the most active place for translation activities. From the perspective of natural geographical factors, the densely populated Guangfu Area had prominent contradictions between people and land due to convenient shipping conditions, forming a tradition of daring to go abroad, which enabled Guangfu translators much earlier and more easily to experience the baptism of western industrial and political civilization.

From the perspective of human geography, the Guangfu Area, close to Hong Kong and Macao, were far from the central power center and had pioneering and pragmatic regional customs, which made it become an important translation center. From Guangzhou to Shanghai had witnessed the origin and growth of China's modern translation publishing industry.

2.3 Translators Clue

According to Li Wanqin's research, the translators in modern China in Lingnan translation zone mainly included missionary translators and native western learning translators (2024, p. 25, 41). And the native western learning translators were composed of Lin Zexun's translation team, the translators of "Young Children Studying in the U.S.", and novel translators. As the core of Lingnan translation zone, Guangdong translators in the late Qing Dynasty also included the above two big groups. In addition to the above translators' groups, linguists (unofficial interpreters), the translators from Tung Wen College in Guangzhou, reformist translators and revolutionary translators also should not be neglected. Not only the single translator but also the translators' groups are the valuable research topics.

3. The Global Historical Approach to Regional Translation History

The rise of global history dates back to the 1960s and currently represents an important development trend in the fields of Chinese and western historiography (Yuan, 2019, p. 66). Globalization has undoubtedly modified our academic and research practices. The traditional boundaries that have historically separated disciplines are now blurring to shed light on problems and challenges that can not be exclusively examined from a single disciplinary or national vantage point (Roig-Sanz, 2022, p. 131). Global history aims to research the historical process that transcends national, political, geographical, or cultural boundaries. This means that global history is different from world history, and it is a historical perspective or an approach for historical research. In the international historical arena, global history emphasizes viewing the entire world as an inseparable organic unity, examining the emergence and development of human civilization in different regions of the world from a global perspective rather than a single country or region, with focusing on historical movements, events, and their interrelationships, influences, and interactions that have had a significant impact on the course of human history (Lan & Huang, 2023, p. 60). As a research perspective, the global historical approach is inspiring for the research of various branches of history, whether it is social history, economic history, civilization exchange history, or global micro-history.

The history of communication is the essence of global history, and cross-cultural interaction is the core concept of global history research. Translation is not only a language conversion, but also a cross-cultural interaction and knowledge transfer on a global scale. There is no discipline that does not accumulate knowledge through translation, and there is no discipline that does not present ideas in the form of translation development; there is no discipline without its own knowledge of translation history, and all disciplines must pay tribute to translation (Yang, 2021, p. 2). Historical perspectives have always played a role in translation studies (TS), but it was not until the beginning of the twenty-first century that translation history emerged as a specific field (Rundle, 2021, p. xviii). Researchers contributing to this discourse, however, have mostly been concerned with establishing epistemological definitions and exploring the role of translation in national cultures or religions. A concept encompassing the "global" has thus far been lacking (Roig-Sanz, 2022, p. 132). It is evident that there is a close connection between translation history and global history. In Yuan Limei's viewpoint, translation history is an integral part of global history, because from a global perspective, the process of contact, communication, and influence between people from different regions in history is inevitably accompanied by the occurrence of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural activities, making translation a potential condition for the establishment of global historical propositions; and it can provide a large number of rich micro cases for the transition from "priori" to "experience" in global history. Global translation history presents the features of connections across space and over time. Lan Hongjun and Huang Hanhui (2023, p. 65) summarized the significance of the global historical path for the study of translation history: global history breaks free from the confines of national and ethnic narratives, helping expand the spatial scope of translation history research and include translators, translations, and translation events from peripheral fields in the scope of examination; the global perspective of history emphasizes the holistic nature of human historical processes, which helps to avoid adopting a linear thinking approach to view history and thus gain a more comprehensive understanding of translated historical facts; global history research emphasizes the interaction and correlation between various events, conducting synchronic comparisons, which helps to impact on each other, explore new knowledge, and deepen understanding; the global

historical perspective adopts the dimension of "other narrative" to objectively outline the overall historical ecology of translation.

After the mid-20th century, local (regional) history research was influenced by the national history research and almanac school, gradually breaking away from the traditional isolated and static historical writing, and forming a local history research thinking of getting macro insights through micro research problems, providing a theoretical basis for the emergence of global local history in the future. Since the 1990s, local history has been influenced by global history, and there has been a trend towards the integration of global history and local history (Wang, 2023, p. 125). The history of local (regional) translation, using time as a clue and just focusing on translation elites, is certainly correct. But the writing of regional translation history in such ways is simple, static, and isolated. Especially in regions where translation activities are highly active, the writing of translation history should be examined in a larger context, and employing the global history approach to regional translation history is is particularly necessary. There are three research approaches in global regional history: the global historical perspective of regions, the spatial shift of globalization entrance, and the global micro historical method based on individual/group activities (Wang, 2023, p. 126). The above framework provides valuable references for researching regional translation history.

4. A Proposal for Guangdong Translation History in the Late Qing Dynasty Based on the Global Historical Approach

In modern China, the wave of western learning spreading eastward swept across the north and south of China, injecting a flowing stream of ideas and culture into the river of modern Chinese history (Feng, 2011, p. 2). Guangdong is one of the most active regions in China's modern history. In the late Qing Dynasty, Guangdong translators played important roles in the Westernization Movement, the Reform Movement of 1898, and the bourgeois revolution. Guangdong translation history in the late Qing Dynasty is a magnificent regional translation history that is closely related to the outside world. In the following, research perspective, narrative style and writing methods of the proposal for Guangdong translation history in the late Qing Dynasty will be discussed based on the global historical approach.

4.1 Research Perspective: Writing Regional Translation Through Global History

The commercial interpreters (known as "linguists" in historical context) can be regarded as the earliest translators in Guangdong translation history of late Qing Dynasty. As an intermediary involved in Sino-foreign trade or negotiation affairs, the name and characteristics of "linguists" are related to the location and route of European trade in China that began in the 16th century (Si, 2002, p. 45). On the edge of awakening in the social upheaval caused by the invasion of western countries, Lin Zexu presided over translating the western newspapers, books, and laws to introduce new knowledge about the outside world. His translation helped his fight against the western invaders, fostered a new national identity concept, initiated a new national defense system, and established an international recognition of China (Tang, 2019, p. 39). Guangzhou Tung Wen College was first modern educational institution in Guangdong, which aimed to cultivate translation and western learning talents. The majority of translators of "Young Children Studying in the U.S." were from Guangdong, and they witnessed the Westernization Movement and the Reform Movement of 1898 in the late Qing Dynasty. They were the preachers of the late Qing Dynasty's translation climax, which deserves further exploration (Ye, 2014, p. 47). Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were the representatives of reformist translation thinkers, and Liang Qichao actively engaged in novel translation practice and advocated novel revolution. Their translation thoughts were closely related to international situation and bourgeois reformist ideology. After the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, the indirect translation activities from Japanese reached a climax, and Guangdong translator Tang Bao'e was the typical representative amid enthusiasm for translating Japanese works. In terms of translating Marxism, Liang Qichao first introduced the Japanese term "socialism" into China and gradually formed a commonly used Chinese translation term; Zhu Zhixin first translated and introduced the ten major principles of the Communist Manifesto, and for the first time, Marxist theory was defined as scientific socialism. It can be said that the translation activities in Guangdong in the late Qing Dynasty did not occur in a vacuum. Whether it's general history writing or case studies, the global historical perspective is more conducive to drawing the overall picture of relevant translation history and writing a profound translation history.

4.2 Narrative Style: Combing Historical Materials with Translation Theories

In the field of historical research, the only true way is the paradigm of combing historical materials with related

theories (Jia, 2018, p. 112). However, it is not an easy task to achieve the above goal, and most research books are basically at the level of data display. Combing historical materials with translation theories requires a historical empathy perspective of to conduct in-depth and theoretical analysis and evaluation of the collected historical materials. After systematic and scientific analysis and summary, it is elevated into a future-oriented disciplinary theoretical system, in order to achieve the goal of "recounting the past, thinking about the future, and understanding the truth" (Jia, 2018, p. 112). Specifically, ideology, patronage, poetics, translator behavior criticism, and geo-translation studies can all be used to elaborate translation history.

4.3 Writing Methods: Interdisciplinary Research Methods

In Huang Yanjie's view, the specific regional translation history had already matured, laying a solid foundation for the subsequent writing of global translation history (2022, p. 174). Interdisciplinary research is the biggest characteristic of the methodology of translation history research, writing regional translation history requires both knowledge archaeology and regional historical methods (Zhang & Zhang, 2023), as well as a global historical perspective, for example, the the research method of global-micro translation history. A global translation history may also imply, on a different level, a big perspective, which we have defined as involving (1) large-scale research (geographical and chronological); (2) massive data understood as gig data, accompanied by little data, drawing on a wide range of often heterogeneous and non-structured sources; (3) the use of computational techniques as part of the research process and for the production of knowledge rather than simply for the visualization of data (Roig-Sanz, 2022, p. 139). To sum up, it is necessary to adopt interdisciplinary methods when writing regional translation history, including the methods of both history and translation studies.

5. Conclusion

As a southeastern coastal province, Guangdong has a long history of translation. In the late Qing Dynasty, translation activities were diverse and active in Guangdong. Many historical influential translators had emerged, for example, the early linguists, western missionary translators, Lin Zexun's translation team, the translators from Tung Wen College in Guangzhou, the translators of "Young Children Studying in the U.S.", reformist translators and revolutionary translators. Taking time (history), place (geography) and translators into consideration is the first step when writing Guangdong translation history. And knowledge archaeology and the regional historical methods are the basic methodological instruments. Global history research emphasizes the interaction and correlation between various events, conducting synchronic comparisons, which helps to impact on each other, explore new knowledge, and deepen understanding. This Approach provides a conceptual framework for Guangdong translation history in the late Qing Dynasty. Whether it's general history writing or case studies, the global historical perspective is more conducive to drawing the overall picture of Guangdong translation history in the late Qing Dynasty and profound description. In terms of narrative style, combing historical materials with translation theories is essential; in other words, the research without theoretical elaboration is not profound. And the interdisciplinary research methods is conducive to conducting the research on regional translation history from the global perspective, including collecting the related chronological, geographical and translators data through Conducive to conducting research on regional translation history with a global perspective, big data and computational techniques.

Notes

(1) Knowledge archaeology was a fundamental term of French philosopher Foucault, which was both Foucault's philosophical method and the title of his work. In his book Knowledge Archaeology (1969), Foucault reflected on the issue of discourse power in history and historical literature; with Knowledge archaeology as a means to excavate the history of knowledge, explore and analyze the core of traditional historical records and be followed by dialectical thinking on historical knowledge (Zhang & Zhang, 2023, p. 42).

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