

Setting A Model for The Critical Histories of Translated Literature: A Review of *Studies of Literature from Marginalized Nations in Modern China, with a Focus on Eastern European Literature*

Jiang Fan

Abstract: Prof. Song Binghui's *Studies of Literature from Marginalized Nations in Modern China, with a Focus on Eastern European Literature* was published in 2024 jointly by Peking University Press and Springer. With both clarity and thoroughness, the book highlights the long-neglected topic of the translation and reception of literature from marginalized nations in China, proposes an effective approach to the complex and multi-layered literary relations via historical exploration of translated literature, and contributes to the supplement and specification of the term "weak (culture/nation)" that is one of the most frequently occurring notion in translation theories and cross-cultural studies. In terms of the research methodology, the author has combined diachronic survey and synchronic case analyses. While such combination is now a common practice by the scholars dealing with the history of translated literature, what's special about this book is the author's concentrated perspective of observation through multi-faceted prism, i.e., viewing the translation of Eastern European literature as an indispensable aspect of the construction of Chinese national consciousness and modern Chinese literature and thus encompassing the diversified topics and scenarios under discussion as the integral constituents of the research. The accomplishment of the study with high maturity is due to the author's rich experiences in both comparative literature and translation studies and his superb mastery of the research methods. A significant advancement in both fields, it sets a model for the composition of critical histories of translated literature of extreme "richness and complexity."

Keywords: *Studies of Literature from Marginalized Nations in Modern China, with a Focus on Eastern European Literature*; critical histories of translated literature; translation and reception; weak (culture/nation)

Author: **Jiang Fan** is Associate Professor at Graduate Institute of Interpreting and Translation (GIIT), Shanghai International Studies University (Shanghai 200083, China). Her research interests include the study of translated literature and T&I

studies (Email: cherryjiang75@163.com).

标题：为翻译文学史的撰写树立榜样——《弱势民族文学在现代中国：以东欧文学为中心》述评

内容摘要：宋炳辉教授的最新英文专著《弱势民族文学在现代中国：以东欧文学为中心》于2024年由北京大学出版社和斯普林格出版社联合出版。该书详述了弱势民族文学在中国的翻译和接受，基于对翻译文学的历史性探索，对复杂而丰富的文学关系问题进行了深入的探讨，并由此对“弱势（文化/民族）”这一重要术语进行了有效的补充和细化。就研究方法而言，作者结合了历时考察和共时个案研究两种路径。尽管上述方法的组合已成为翻译文学史常见的撰写和研究手段，该书的特出之处在于其持续聚焦的观察视角和多侧面的观察棱镜——作者始终将东欧文学的翻译看作中国民族意识和现代文学构建过程中的重要推进力量，在这一观察立场之下，涵括纷繁多样的话题和情形，使其成为研究的有机组成部分。该研究完备而成熟，这主要得益于作者在比较文学和翻译研究领域的丰富经验及其对相关研究方法的熟练把握。该书作为上述两个领域的重要成果，为具有特殊“丰富性和复杂性”的专题翻译文学史的撰写树立了典范。

关键词：《弱势民族文学在现代中国：以东欧文学为中心》；翻译文学史；翻译和接受；弱势（国家/文化）

作者简介：江帆，上海外国语大学高级翻译学院副教授，主要研究领域为翻译文学及口笔译研究。

1. Overview of the Book

Prof. Song Binghui (宋炳辉)'s *Studies of Literature from Marginalized Nations in Modern China, with a Focus on Eastern European Literature* was published in 2024 jointly by Peking University Press and Springer. As the author remarked in the preface, "Originally written for Chinese readers, the opportunity to translate this book for an English-speaking audience is undoubtedly a delightful prospect." The newly published book is the English translation of the author's 2017 work in Chinese and despite that the author was once worried about the "considerable challenge(s) involved in this endeavour" (*Studies of Literature from Marginalized Nations* vi), the 'delightful prospect' has been adequately realized, for not only the challenges are very properly handled, but also the processes of settling these translation problems even make the book more rigorously informative in the English-speaking context.

Taking the author's 2017 book as the source text of the translation, the English

version mainly follows the original structure, only with some slight alterations. The most obvious rewriting occurs when the original “Introduction” (绪论) is replaced by “Preface,” the former mainly dealing with the key notions like “nation” (民族), “nationalism” (民族主义) and “weak/marginalized nation” (弱势民族) as the underlying perspectives of observation, while the latter centering upon the issues of translation, like “accurately rendering the names of numerous authors and works from over ten languages across Eastern Europe and East Asia into their original languages in the translation.” Apart from this shift of focus in the introduction part of the book, the English version appears a rather complete translation of the Chinese original.

In Chapter 1 “Literary Eastern Europe from the Viewpoint of Sino-foreign Literary Relations,” Song takes strenuous efforts to clarify “Eastern Europe” in three sections: “From Geographical Eastern Europe to Political Eastern Europe,” “From Cultural Eastern Europe to Literary Eastern Europe” and “The Common Characteristics of Eastern European Literature.” The author emphasized from the very beginning that “although it seems to be a geographical region,” “Eastern Europe” is never a self-evident geographical term. Instead, it is constructed in the long river of history, “in the historical narrative for almost the entire twentieth century, particularly for a long time after the Second World War, [...] which reinforced the political and cultural implication of this concept” (*Studies of Literature from Marginalized Nations* 1-10). Indeed, the concept “East Europe” has taken shape respectively in its geographical, political, cultural and literary sense and thus varies in different contexts. This surely adds to the complexity and difficulties of the discussion, but at the same time contributes to the richness and significance of the study. It is in this sense that the author’s clarification of the concept is truly worthwhile and effective: Only when “Eastern Europe” is so precisely defined, demarcated and contextualized can it really make sense and function well as an encompassing and clear-cut working definition.

From Chapter 2 to Chapter 5, the author makes a diachronic survey of the translation history of Eastern European literature in China as follows: “The Beginnings of the Chinese Translation of Eastern European Literature in the Late Qing and Early Republic of China,” “Translating the Literature of the Weak and Small Nations in the May Fourth Era,” “Translation and Introduction of Eastern European Literature in the 1930s and 1940s” and “Translating the Literature of Marginalized Nations and the Construction of a National Culture in the People’s Republic of China” (*Studies of Literature from Marginalized Nations* 11-92). It is noteworthy that, far beyond providing a mere list of the authors and works

translated, Song has sifted among voluminous references and focuses on the most conspicuous translation phenomena, which makes such a linear description an integral section of the book and set a model for the composition of the diachronic review part in a critical history of translated literature in its real sense.

In the following five chapters, the author delves into in-depth case analyses of some most quintessential topics about the translated literature of marginalized nations in China. From the titles of these chapters, i.e., “The Different Reception of Henryk Sienkiewicz, Julius Fučík and Bertolt Brecht in China,” “Milan Kundera in China,” “Esperanto and the Translation of the Literature of Marginalized Nations,” “The Research and Translation of Eastern European Literature in the First 60 Years of the PRC” and “National Consciousness Versus Cosmopolitan Consciousness: Rabindranath Tagore in China” (*Studies of Literature from Marginalized Nations* 93-208), the readers may find the topics under discussion not paralleled but multi-leveled and multi-faceted. This definitely echoes with the uniqueness, richness and complexity of “Eastern Europe” and “Eastern European literature” the author has disclosed at the very beginning of the book. But more importantly, it also reflects the complexity and subtlety when China takes East Europe as a “mirror” to observe and examine itself, which in turn, demonstrates a very effective approach to the diversified scenarios under a seemingly “unified” topic of translated literature, i.e. “Eastern European literature.”

Chapter 12 can partly be regarded as the conclusion of the book. For the purpose of reinforcing the significance of the literature of marginalized nation in Chinese-foreign relations, the author makes comprehensive and in-depth reflections on the construction of the national consciousness in China that was inspired and triggered by the literature from the marginalized nations.

2. Comments and Reflections

2.1 Setting a model for composing critical histories of translated literature

With the title *Studies of Literature from Marginalized Nations in Modern China*, the book is by nature a critical history or historical exploration of translated literature. As Even-Zohar noted, if a study intends to explain how a literary system operates “in time” instead of “in principle [...] outside the realm of time,” it’s both functional and historical. In addition, “Once the historical aspect is admitted into the functional approach, [...] it must be admitted that both synchrony and diachrony are historical” (“Polysystem Theory” 11). In terms of the research methodology, the author has combined diachronic survey and synchronic case analyses, which makes the book an integrated whole. While such combination is now a common practice

by the scholars dealing with the history of translated literature, what's special about this book is the author's concentrated perspective of observation through multi-leveled/faceted prism, which sets a model for composing histories of translated literature of extreme complexity and richness.

As briefly summarized in previous section, in the diachronic review part of the book (Chapter 2 to Chapter 5), Song is not content with just listing all the facts and information related. Instead, he always bears in mind "the special role Eastern European literature has played in terms of the origination, formation and evolution of modern Chinese literature" so as to "fully disclose the unique nature of modern literature in China, a late-developing country and highlight the richness and complexity of its modernity" (*The Literature of Marginalized Nationalities* 15). Therefore, while the title of each chapter suggests that the main body of the diachronic survey follows the timeline and covers the historical periods from late Qing to "the second 30 years of the People's Republic of China," the subheadings of the sections in each chapter do not emphasize the time signals but exhibit the author's varied focuses on diversified objects for observation, including the translated literature from a certain nation like Poland, individual translators with great influence like Zhou Brothers (周氏兄弟) and Zhu Xiang (朱湘), representative figures of domestic literary trend like Mao Dun (茅盾) and *Fiction Monthly* (小说月报), and the factors governing the professionals' choices like ideology of national discourse and the local cultural norms. Diversified as the topics are, all the items under discussion are like numerous facets of a diamond, i.e., the underlying perspective the author holds so firmly and consistently, that is, viewing the translation of Eastern European literature as an indispensable aspect of the construction of Chinese national consciousness and modern Chinese literature. Likewise, in the case analysis part of the book (Chapter 6 to Chapter 11), when Song probes into the synchronic exploration of the translation phenomena based on voluminous literary texts, historical references and research findings, the above perspective of observation remains unchanged and, as already reviewed and commented in previous section, the objects/phenomena/properties under discussion are also at multiple levels, of different categories and with varied functional and relational significance in the given historical context, which is in line with the extreme "richness and complexity" of the subject matter and at the same time is so effectively addressed with clear narratives and thorough analyses.

To summarize, Song insists on one clear-cut and concentrated perspective of observation and, through all the scholarly efforts demonstrated in the book, has conducted an almost exhaustive exploration of the complicated translation

phenomena to facilitate the observation from the intended perspective. A History of translated literature should be “a history of literary translation, influence and reception” (Xie 118), but it’s by no means easy to achieve all these purposes in practice. Encouragingly, as a renowned scholar who has been devoted to “comparative literature and translation studies,” and especially “the study of Chinese-foreign literary relations for nearly thirty years” (Jiang 242), Song’s rich experiences of case studies endow him with a superb mastery of the research methods in various fields so as to synthesize all the above aspects in his historical study of the translated literature from marginalized nation. It is in this methodological sense that Song has set an effective model for future composition of critical histories of translated literature.

2.2 Highlighting a long-neglected aspect of Chinese-foreign literary relation: Taking the marginalized nations as a mirror to view “self” and construct national consciousness

As repeatedly emphasized in my previous comments, a concentrated perspective of observation is one of the most distinctive methodological features of the study, which considers the translation of the literature from the marginalized nations as an important aspect of China’s construction of national consciousness and an indispensable part in the formation of its modern literature. It is this underlying perspective of observation that encompasses the diversified topics and scenarios under discussion and make them integral constituents of the research. Nevertheless, Song does not intentionally take this perspective for the convenience of categorizing the research objects. The choice is out of thematic rather than methodological considerations. It is exactly his initial observation and ultimate purpose to approach and explain how China has taken the translated literature from the marginalized nations as a “mirror” to view the image of “self” and construct its own national consciousness, and subsequently the formation of its modernity. To put it in another way, this perspective of observation actually yields the major research questions and most fruitful research findings of Song’s study.

Based on the above understanding, we find it not surprising that almost all the reviewers of the original Chinese versions of the book lay their emphasis on this “perspective,” “standpoint” or “position” and highly praise Song’s research as “filling the gap” for its unique perspective dealing with “a long-neglected topic of literary studies.” For example, two years after the publication of the earliest Chinese version of the book in 2007, Cai Chunhua (蔡春华) holds that “this research fills a gap in the field, stimulating further reflections and discussions, and providing clearer perspectives and research methods for future studies. Besides, with the introduction

of some long neglected subject matters of literary studies, such new reference frames will push forward and facilitate the restoration of the diversified nature of literature in academic discussions” (202).

When reviewing Song’s 2017 work which is the expansion and revision of the 2007 version and basically the source text of the newly published English version, Jiang Zhiqin (姜智芹) also praises Song’s endeavor as “not only fills the gap in terms of the literary relationship between China and the marginalized nations but also further expands the scope of the study of Chinese-foreign literary relations.” Meanwhile, Jiang attaches much importance to the sense of ‘subjectivity’ manifested in Song’s perspective of observation: “his main perspective is to examine the unique role that the literature from marginalized nations has played in the evolution of modern Chinese literature” (242).

When all the reviewers of the Chinese version of the book agree that the greatest significance of Song’s research lies its exploration of a long-neglected topic of Chinese-foreign literary relations, which fills the gap in the field, a new question arises about the significance of translating this book into English. Intended for the readers in the English-speaking context, the academic value and significance of the book might be reviewed from some more specific research findings.

As for the research findings and academic achievements deriving from Song’s perspective of observation, Jiang makes rather pertinent summaries: [1] Thorough analyses of the factors governing the translation, reception and influence of Eastern European literature in China at different historical stages, i.e., “the earliest occurrence of translation during the time of national crisis, the ideological similarities between China and Eastern European nations after the founding of the People’s Republic of China” (243), and China’s preferences for the Nobel Prize winners among the Eastern European authors in the new era since 1980s; [2] Detailed description of the dynamic “self” and “other” relations exemplified by the historical scenarios about how China has taken the marginalized nations as a “mirror” to view “self” (244) and thus builds its own national consciousness. [3] In-depth investigation of the innovative force of the literary “repertoire” from the marginalized nations that have been introduced into Chinese literary system and thus facilitated the formation of modern Chinese literature and the establishment of its own poetic “repertoire” (245).

Surely such a substantial and informative research would be an eye-opener for the English-speaking readers, but more specifically, for different groups of readers, it will take on diversified meanings. Firstly, for the professional readers engaged in Chinese studies, the detailed description of the varied scenarios of translation history

will provide them with highly authentic literary, social and historical references. The richness and complexity of the research that make it stand out among Chinese scholars will also apply to these Sinologists for their familiarity with the background knowledge and their thirst for more. For the comparatists, especially those focused on the studies of literary relations, the dynamic literary relations between China and the marginalized nations would provide them with precious cases that are both informative and thought-provoking. As Song put it, China and the marginalized nations “resonated with each other in their development of this relationship, hot or cold, smooth or problematic, and this is reflected in the history of Sino-Eastern European literary relations” (*Studies of Literature from Marginalized Nations* 240), which will offer some implications for the future studies of comparative literature in the English-speaking context. And for the scholars of cultural studies, a completely new model of “self/other” relationship between the traditionally “weak” cultures will inject new blood and vitality into this field and widen the horizon of cultural studies. Finally, for the college students and other readers who take some general interests in literature and culture, the book may trigger their further interests in Chinese culture or literature as a whole.

2.3 Theoretical contribution: supplement and specification of “weak” and “marginalized” as key notions of translation and cross-cultural studies

In the earliest Chinese version of the book based on his doctorate dissertation, Song refers to polysystem hypothesis as one of the most important theoretical resources guiding his research, “The author holds that the polysystem theory proposed by Israelite scholar Itamar Even-Zohar offers some most relevant implications for the investigation” (*The Literature of Weak Nations* 25-26). He then outlines the basics of polysystem theory, exemplifies its explanatory power and its applicability in the studies of Chinese-foreign literary relations, listing all the three scenarios involved in Even-Zohar’s hypothesis that give rise to the central position of translated literature in a literary polysystem. In the 2017 version of the book, however, Song reduces this section into one sentence: “In terms of the proposal of research questions and the train of thoughts of the study, the author has been greatly inspired by some translation theories from the cultural domain, but the current study is not intended to further testify these theories” (*The Literature of Marginalized Nationalities* Introduction 15). When it comes to the English version published in 2024, the original “Introduction” is replaced by “Preface,” which does not include the information about the translation theories Song has referred to. Even though polysystem theory can hardly find its obvious traits in recent versions of the book, it’s safe to assume that the essence of polysystem hypothesis has merged into the

lines of the book, highly recognized by the author and naturally serving as one of the theoretical frameworks facilitating the discussions.

Bearing in mind that he is conducting a historical exploration of translation phenomena instead of theoretical reflections based on case analyses, Song has repeatedly clarified that he has no intention to testify the theories he has referred to in his study. But in practice, his work has made considerable theoretical contribution to the supplement and specification of “weak” and “marginalized” as key notions of translation and cross-cultural studies, especially in the scope of polysystem theory.

For a long time, the lack of accurate connotation or precise definition of some key terms has been regarded as an obvious flaw of polysystem theory. Among these terms, the “evaluative” ones, especially those often appear in pairs, like “weak/strong,” “central/peripheral” and “adequacy/acceptability” are the most conspicuous, for they have been put forward to define and describe the conditions of the fundamental hypothesis and may serve as parameters in related studies. Susan Bassnett considers polysystem hypothesis “startlingly important” for its great explanatory power, but the statement of the hypothesis “somewhat crude” due to the vagueness of these terms that “present all kinds of problems.” She takes “weak” as a typical example to illustrate the problem, “What does it mean to define a literature as ‘peripheral’ or ‘weak’? [...] Are these criteria literary or political?” (Bassnett 127-128) She may be right. But if we look back at such “crudity,” we may find the other side of the coin: For one thing, the lack of fixed connotations of such key terms as “weak” also suggests the inclusiveness of polysystem hypothesis; for another, the “evaluative” terms proposed are functional and relational and only make sense when they occur in various relations within or between literary (poly)systems. In this sense, the specification of the terms in case studies is of great significance both for pushing forward the case analysis and enhancing the explanatory power of the theoretical hypothesis.

It’s a coincidence but not entirely a coincidence that Song’s study also centers upon the key words of “weak” and “marginalized,” the term Even-Zohar uses in his hypothesis to define the second condition when translated literature may occupy a central position in a literary polysystem, i.e., “when a literature is either ‘peripheral’ or ‘weak’, or both” (“The Position of Translated Literature” 121). Surely Song and Even-Zohar started from different paths: With the leading key word and the frequently occurring terms like “weak,” “peripheral,” “marginalized” and “crisis,” Song started his academic discussion not only from the tradition of comparative literature, cultural studies and translation theories, but especially from the standpoint of a Chinese scholar who has inherited the national consciousness

from generations of Chinese intellectuals that was strengthened by the national identity of being “weak” in very special historical contexts. Nevertheless, when they meet halfway and Song finds polysystem hypothesis most relevant and inspiring, his exploration focused on “weak” also contributes to refine the polysystem hypothesis, supplementing and specifying a series of key terms. It’s worth mentioning that, besides “weak,” Song also elaborates on other terms like “crisis”: “The national crisis haunted China for over a century, [...] This national crisis highlighted the need for change and the modernization of Chinese national concept” (*Studies of Literature from Marginalized Nations* 210). All these can be regarded as the specification and supplement of the terms and notions in translation theories as well as cultural studies.

3. Summaries and Suggestions

To summarize the merits of the book, it appears “a significant advancement in this field” (Jiang 242) and sets a model for the critical histories of translated literature. With both clarity and thoroughness, the book highlights the long-neglected topic of the translation and reception of literature from marginalized nations in China, proposes an effective approach to the complexity, richness and multi-layered feature of literary relations via historical exploration of translated literature, and contributes to the supplement and specification of the term “weak (culture/nation)” that is one of the most frequently occurring notion in translation theories and other cross-cultural studies. Besides Song’s awareness and insistence of the concentrated perspective of observation based on “Chinese subjective viewpoint” and the unique subject matter that has been long neglected, the accomplishment of the study with high maturity is due to the author’s rich experiences in both comparative literature and translation studies and his superb mastery of the research methods in various related fields.

If “rewriting” the history of literature needs some new models and perspectives to systematize and categorize the already existing systems or categories of the literary genres, themes, topics and other elements in the “repertoire” of poetics in a (poly)system of a national literature, the “discovery” of “translated literature” by Itamar Even-Zohar, Xie Tianzhen and other representatives of “descriptive/systemic paradigm” are undoubtedly one of the most encouraging achievement in this dimension. Nevertheless, it is also a necessity to consider the effective research methods to address this newly emerging category, otherwise the potential explanatory power, both functional and historical, cannot be brought into full play. With one clear-cut perspective of observation encompassing the extreme richness

and complexity of the multi-leveled/faceted translation phenomena under discussion, Song has launched his research with both comprehensiveness and deep insights. In this methodological sense, the book offers considerable implications for the future composition of critical histories of translated literature.

The English-speaking readers will find great pleasure in reading this book and salute both the author and the translator for the great efforts they've paid. As reviewed in 2.2, The translation is truly worthwhile. If the original "Introduction" had been preserved in the English version, where all the key notions could be clarified in a systematic way instead of being highlighted sporadically in different sections, the book might be more impressive and helpful for most of the intended readers.

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