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Mapping the Translator: A Study of Liang Shiqiu

Liping Bai. London and New York: Routledge, 2022. xii+168 pp.

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BOOK REVIEW

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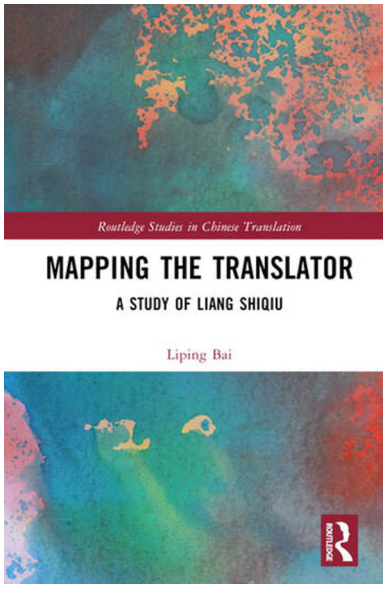

An established essayist, literary critic, lexicographer, and translator, Liang Shiqiu 梁实秋 (1903–1987) has long been shunned by mainland Chinese literary historians for ideological reasons. In accordance with the dominant ideology in the People's Republic of China (PRC), Liang was a stubborn opponent of communism and, for a long time, labeled a "reactionary bourgeois littérateur" (3). In the 1920s and '30s he waged a heated war of words against Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936) regarding translation criteria and the politics of literature. Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893–1976) criticized Liang for "upholding bourgeois literature and art" in his 1942 talk at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art.[1] Consequently, Liang had been a target of harsh criticism in the PRC till the late 1980s when a fair evaluation of him finally emerged. Undoubtedly, Liang deserves an honorable position in Chinese translation history for his accomplishments, particularly his complete translation of Shakespeare's oeuvre, a Herculean project which he undertook single-handedly between 1931 and 1967. Curiously enough, he has been hitherto under-researched in and outside of China as a translator. The situation is now remedied by the recent publication of Liping Bai's *Mapping the Translator: A Study of Liang Shiqiu*.

This reviewer proposes two reasons for the lack of systematic study of Liang as a translator. One is historical: a kind of "scholarly inertia" arising from the longtime evasion of Liang in the PRC has caused translation researchers to neglect him intentionally or inadvertently. The other is logistical. Liang had translated only ten Shakespearean plays before leaving in 1949 for Taiwan, where he did the bulk of his work. Hence, a large portion of research materials proved hard to obtain for mainland scholars when cultural exchanges across the Taiwan Straits came to a halt.[2] Bai's work was completed in Hong Kong, an ideal place for undertaking this project. Hailing from the mainland, he earned a PhD from the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2000 with a thesis titled "Poetics, Ideology, Patronage and Translation: A Study of Liang Shiqiu's Translations" [诗学, 意识形态及赞助人与翻译: 梁实秋翻译研究]. With substantial revision and enlargement, it appeared in book form in 2016.[3] Now before the reader is his English book devoted to the same translator, but its main chapters are either newly written or updated from the Chinese edition. Moreover, though mainly drawing on André Lefevere's rewriting theory, Bai exploits Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" to sharpen his theoretical framework.

Bai's volume aims to "map" Liang, that is, to locate and highlight his position in Chinese translation history, while also bent on exploring "appropriate methods in doing research in translator studies" (9). To achieve this objective, Bai investigates Liang's poetics and its diachronic changes; how patrons and professionals influenced his poetics and decisions; the interaction and conflict between Liang's ideology, the dominant ideology and his translations; and his famous debates with Lu Xun. Bai scrutinizes not only the strategies of select translations, but also the paratexts accompanying such works, Liang's recollections, and critical accounts about him. This leads to his main conclusion: Liang's literary poetics and translational poetics were strongly influenced by the New Humanism advocated by his Harvard professor Irving Babbitt.

Bai's "Introduction" summarizes Liang's professional career, highlighting two points: Liang's various translation projects and the fact that he was a longtime "controversial figure" in mainland China (3). However, Bai does not explore how the latter bears on the scant scholarly attention to Liang, likely because he skips a literature review. This opening chapter also reflects on the emerging subfield of "translator studies" by citing Andrew Chesterman's envisaged map consisting of "cultural," "cognitive," and "sociological" branches. Arguing that they are related to the study of a translator's ideology, poetics, and social networking with patrons and professionals, Bai discusses the analytical potency of Lefevere's key concepts of "patronage," "ideology," and "poetics" (4, 5). Though an oft-cited translation theorist, Lefevere's work is, according to Theo Hermans, "frequently superficial, inconsistent, and sloppy."[4] Hence, Bai suggests adding "translator's poetics" to Lefevere's conceptual framework, noting that "poetics" can either refer to literary poetics (a translator's views on literature) or translational poetics (a translator's

views on translation) (5, 6). Bai's work revolves around these central concepts, though occasionally he turns to Bourdieu's "habitus." It is his proposition that combing through textual and extratextual materials can help examine a translator's poetics and ideology.

"Patronage in Liang's Shakespeare Translation" investigates how modern China's leading intellectual and influential scholar Hu Shi 胡适 (1891–1962) acted as Liang's patron. Hu not only initiated and funded Liang's Shakespeare translation project but also advised Liang on specific translation matters, including the use of vernacular Chinese prose for Shakespeare's blank verse and that of footnotes to explain difficult points in the original. An analysis of the patron–translator relationship reveals the multiple roles the former can play in a massive translation project and the importance of a harmonious collaboration between them. Bai's analysis demonstrates that because Liang and Hu shared common ground in the selection of Shakespearean plays for translation and translational poetics, Liang's project could proceed smoothly. Funded by the China Foundation for the Promotion of Education and Culture, whose Translation and Compilation Committee Hu Shi was in charge of in the 1930s, Liang's translations of eight Shakespearean plays were published by the Commercial Press between 1936 and 1939.

"The Influence of Irving Babbitt" examines this impact on Liang's literary and translational poetics, followed by brief discussions of how Liang advocated his Harvard teacher's New Humanism through writings and translations. Both being important literary critics, Liang's acceptance of Babbitt's New Humanism is examined by tracing the diachronic changes in his literary poetics. Meanwhile, Bai shows in detail how Babbitt, who emphasizes abiding human nature and moral restraint, shaped Liang's selection of works to be rendered. For him, the text to be translated should contain "moral seriousness" or reflect universal human nature. Both Shakespeare's plays (initiated by Hu Shi, yet which Liang embraced gladly) and some of the works he translated in his earlier career, including George Eliot's *Silas Marner* and *Mr. Gilfil's Love Story*, meet his selection criteria.

"Liang Shiqiu's Translation Poetics" delves into his views on the proper attitude a translator should adopt, the primary function of literary translation, and the general criteria of translation. It also explores how Liang's translation poetics was influenced by his literary poetics, which was in turn strongly impacted by Babbitt's New Humanism. Bai calls the reader's attention to the fact that Liang practiced exactly what he preached. That is most clearly reflected in the "serious attitude" toward his job, his selection of literary classics for translation, and his employment of an academic translation strategy while trying to avoid extreme literalism. Bai notes that Liang, who could write elegant Chinese essays, produced versions of Shakespeare that read rather inelegantly. This is an interesting, though not fully explored, case in which a translator chose to make his identity as writer "invisible" (55).

"The Performability of Shakespeare" explores how Liang's translation of Shakespeare was influenced by his literary poetics and the target-language readers he had in mind. Intending his translations for the page,[5] Liang tried to retain what he believed to be the original flavor of Shakespeare's writing, including its obscurity and obscenity, and used translation methods (among these, supplying copious footnotes and keeping the original punctuation) not conducive to producing a drama translation for the stage. According to Bai, Liang's stance on the performability of his translations can be ascribed to his view on drama, which was strongly influenced by Aristotle. Echoing Aristotle's observation that "Tragedy like Epic poetry produces its effect even without action; it reveals its power by mere reading," Liang maintains that "drama can be put on stage, but can also exist independently of the stage" (67, 66).

"The Translation of Strindberg's *Married*" investigates Liang's select translation of Swedish writer August Strindberg's collection of short stories, focusing on the ideological and poetical considerations involved in the choice. Liang's Chinese anthology (1930) is based on a 1917 incomplete, self-censored English version comprising nineteen stories, of which only nine were included. Owing to his harsh words on women in this volume, Strindberg was for a long time criticized by his contemporaries as a misogynist. Bai's thematic analysis of the nine pieces indicates that Liang chose to translate only those stories whose themes were acceptable to him or consistent with his view on marital life. All "realistic depictions of different types of married life" without much harsh criticism of women, they conform to Liang's literary poetics as was strongly influenced by Babbitt, such as "emphasizing morality and truthful reflection of human nature" and "resisting unrestrained romantic feelings" (82–83). Bai also observes that the other pieces were left out because they either conflicted with Liang's view on marital relations or reflected Strindberg's deep-rooted antipathy toward women, which Liang found unacceptable.

"The Translation of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*" examines the intricate relationship between Liang's political stance, the political ideology dominant in Taiwan in the 1950s, and Liang's use of a pseudonym for this published work. Orwell's novella is a political parable against totalitarianism, sometimes interpreted as a veiled criticism of Stalin's autocratic rule. Liang's political position is best shown in these words: "I long for democracy, but do not like mob violence; I admire heroes, but do not like dictatorship; I love freedom, but do not like lawlessness" (98).This can well explain why he chose Orwell's work for translation. Interestingly, Bai suggests that the translation might have been commissioned by the Kuomintang government, which was adopting an "anti-communism, anti-USSR" policy (103). For lack of reliable evidence, however, the issue of patronage remains unsolved. Nonetheless, Bai lays bare the convergence and conflict between the translator's ideology and the dominant ideology: while the government intended to use Liang's translation against communism, which Liang would embrace, Liang used it to criticize any form of totalitarianism, including the Kuomintang rule in Taiwan. Accordingly, he chose to disguise his true identity to avoid potential risks.

"The Use of Translations for the War of Words" explores this strategy in the protracted debates between Liang and Lu Xun in the 1920s and '30s. In addition to translation-related issues, the Liang-Lu war of words involved the ideological conflicts between the ruling Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party. To refute the opponent's ideological stance, both Lu and Liang exploited translations as weapons, including Rousseau's *Emile* (rendered by another translator), Paul Elmer More's "Property and Law," Polonsky's "Lenin's Views of Art and Culture" (both rendered into Chinese by Liang), and so forth. Yet what is closely related to *Liang as a translator* is Bai's observation that there are "traces of [ideological] manipulation" in Liang's translation because he "only partly agreed with Lenin and Polonsky" (119).

Chapter 9 deals with the different translational poetics held by Liang and Wu Mi 吴宓 (1903–1987), another famous disciple of Babbitt. Surprisingly, here the focus is on Wu, not on Liang. Bai offers a fine-grained analysis of Wu's translational poetics and Babbitt's influence on him. The chapter ends with a habitus-based examination of the reasons for their different views on literature and translation. Wu, who acted like "a latter-day Don Quixote" by advocating the use of classical Chinese and attempting to restore the old literary conventions after the May Fourth Movement (138), is even more under-researched than Liang. Bai's generous treatment of Wu as a translator is commendable, but this chapter should, more fittingly, be included in another book.

Combining both textual and socio-cultural analysis based on copious research materials, Bai's solid and reliable work offers a learned and insightful study of Liang Shiqiu, one of modern China's greatest translators and scholars. It admirably does justice to Liang, who has been denied a proper position in Chinese translation history. Another merit is its sure-handed yet subtle grasp of Babbitt, whose work has often been misunderstood by scholars in China and the United States. Adopting cultural and sociological approaches to translator studies, Bai's trailblazing work should usher in more innovative studies on eminent translators through history. Nevertheless, the book in its current form contains several minor problems: (1) structural blemishes, two of which are previously discussed, plus Chapter 5, which should have given more space to Liang's translation of Shakespeare; (2) the unbalanced use of theories, as seen in the occasional habitus-based analysis of the translator's ideology and poetics; (3) language issues for, while overall Bai's English is felicitous and lucid, it is sometimes marred by traces of Chinese influences, redundancies, or rather dry language; and (4) poor editing and proofreading, witnessed by the typos scattered throughout. Still, these are small quibbles for such an impressive scholarly work. Hopefully errata will be corrected in a revised edition.

Notes

1. Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, 76.
2. Wang, "Review of *Liang Shiqiu as a Translator*," 67–68.
3. Bai, *Liang Shiqiu as a Translator*, 2016.
4. Hermans, *Translation in Systems*, 124.
5. Bai notes that initially neither Hu Shi nor Liang intended to use translated Shakespearean plays for the Chinese stage. In fact, the Translation and Compilation Committee headed by Hu Shi was committed to publishing the world's literary classics in Chinese translation. Hence, Hu selected Shakespeare's plays to be translated for their literary merit.

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About the author

Baorong Wang is professor of Translation Studies at Hangzhou Normal University in Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China. In 2012 he received a PhD in Translation Studies from the University of Hong Kong. His main research interests are the translation and dissemination of Chinese literature, sociological approaches to Translation Studies, and Chinese translation history. He is the author of two scholarly books, including *Modes of Translation and Dissemination for Chinese Literature: With Special Reference to Modern Chinese Fiction in English* [中国文学译介与传播模式研究:以英译现当代小说为中心] which appeared in 2022 from Zhejiang University Press. He has published over 100 articles in Chinese and international refereed journals.

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