

# A Polysystem Perspective in C-E Translation for Global Communication

Yu Hu\*

Shanghai Customs College, Shanghai 201204, China

\*Corresponding author: Yu Hu, huyu@shcc.edu.cn

**Copyright:** © 2024 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

**Abstract:** While polysystem theory is widely applied to literary translation research, there is a lack of observation on C-E translation for global communication (C-E TGC) from the perspective of polysystem. On one hand, the cultural attributes of polysystem theory make it applicable to the analysis of all cultural phenomena. C-E TGC, a translating activity aiming at cultural communication, is no exception. On the other hand, the polysystem theory is particularly suitable to be adopted in the study of C-E TGC, for the translation subsystem, with its task of constructing discourse system and national image, inevitably overlaps and conflicts with other cultural sub-systems. Only when placing it under a multidimensional and dynamic framework can we see clearly the features of C-E TGC. However, the simplistic and abstract tendency of the polysystem theory also implies that it needs to be further refined and expanded in the study of specific issues, especially in the study of C-E TGC, which should incorporate the source language cultural system into the study.

**Keywords:** Polysystem; C-E TGC; Applicability; Suitability

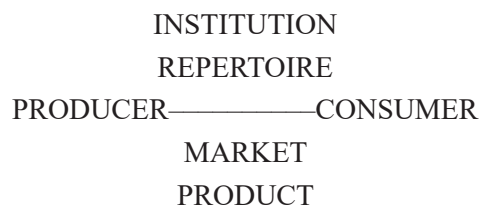
**Online publication:** August 27, 2024

## 1. Introduction

Currently, the application of polysystem theory in translation research in China focuses on literary translation in the target language (TL) system, and thus the Chinese-English Translation for Global Communication (C-E TGC), mainly non-literary translation done by source language (SL) translators, has not yet received much attention. By searching China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) with the keywords of “translation” and “polysystem,” in all subject areas and without limiting the sources of literature, the study found that among the 14 papers and dissertations published in 2023, eight of the papers studied translation from foreign languages to Chinese. Only six dealt with translation from Chinese to foreign languages. Four of the six were studies of literary translations<sup>[1-4]</sup> and only two were of non-literary works<sup>[5-6]</sup>. It can be seen that translation researches from the perspective of polysystem theory mostly focus on literary translation, but the attention paid to the research of C-E TGC is insufficient. This paper argues that the polysystem theory is applicable and suitable for C-E TGC studies, but further refinement and the inclusion of the source language cultural system are needed.

## 2. Applicability of polysystem theory

First of all, the cultural attribute of the polysystem theory determines its applicability to provide theoretical support for C-E TGC research. Even-Zohar I (1990a) says that the study of polysystem theory is by no means limited to the field of literature, as the study of language and culture has never been separated <sup>[7]</sup>. While in the early stage of research, the study primarily constructed a dynamic literary polysystem to illustrate the properties of a polysystem: the dynamic stratification within it, the products of the system and the interrelationships between the systems, Even-Zohar I (1997)'s later studies shifted further to a more macro and abstract study of culture as his research progressed. Zhang N (2001) observes from Even-Zohar's webpage that most of Even-Zohar's writings were centered on literature, language and translation before 1993. However, the title of his latest paper, *Laws of Cultural Interference*, is reshuffled from his earlier work, *Laws of Literary Interference*, a change that is sufficient to illustrate the cultural turn of his research <sup>[8]</sup>. It shows that the application of polysystem theory can be extended to various phenomena in the cultural system. In another of his papers, Even-Zohar constructs a cultural factor model based on Jacobson's model of communication, as shown in the figure below.



**Figure 1.** Factors involved with cultural event <sup>[9]</sup>.

All cultural communication activities, from the sender to the receiver, are included in the polysystem composed of institution, repertoire, market and product as indicated in the diagram, so all cultural phenomena can be examined in this polysystem <sup>[10]</sup>. As Zhang N (2001) points out, though the polysystem theory is usually adopted in literary translation studies, it is in fact a general cultural theory that can be used to guide the overall study of any cultural phenomenon <sup>[11]</sup>. Because of its intrinsic cultural attributes, Even-Zohar's polysystem theory can be extended indefinitely, providing a framework for the interpretation of dynamic cultural phenomena in all cultural systems that are complex, multidimensional and ever-changing, thus enabling researchers to analyze C-E TGC, which involves multiple cultural communities systematically. As C-E TGC is a communication activity aimed at communicating Chinese culture to the world, its purpose for communication is above the common norms for literary translation, so the polysystem theory is more suitable for guiding C-E TGC research than other translation theories.

## 3. Suitability of polysystem theory

The polysystem theory is particularly suitable for the study of C-E TGC. As a special type of translation, C-E TGC has its unique mission of international publicity to build the nation's international image. Therefore, it can be regarded as a subsystem of the translation system, which is governed by the norms of the translation system but has a certain degree of autonomy. However, the subsystems in the cultural system tend to overlap. On the one hand, the C-E TGC system partially overlaps with and influences the co-existing systems within the translation system, such as literary translation, applied translation, translation teaching, etc, which impose influence on each other. On the other hand, the C-E TGC system also intersects with the systems that coexist outside the translation system (political system, ideological system, economic system, literary system, etc.),

which are part of a larger cultural system and involve different cultural communities (the SL community and the TL community). In addition, researchers have to consider the questions concerned with the movements of the subsystems, such as (1) whether the political, ideological, economic, literary, linguistic and other systems that coexist in the two cultural communities conflict; (2) which subsystems occupy the center of the cultural system and enter the repertoire of classical models; (3) how do these co-existing systems affect the subsystem of C-E TGC and generate certain norms, etc. These should be the core questions of C-E TGC research.

In order to promote Chinese culture, the relationship between the C-E TGC subsystem and the overlapping systems must be recognized and the conflicts between the systems and the norms they generate must be clarified to formulate a correct C-E TGC strategy (including the selection of SL texts, translation strategies and so on). The application of polysystem theory regards C-E TGC as a subsystem that is both autonomous and other-governed, which is conducive to placing the complex act of “publicity + translation” in a pluralistic and dynamic cultural system, exploring the movement and conflict between various co-existing systems and their impact on translation behavior, thus helping translators to grasp the features of C-E TGC and providing references to the practice of C-E TGC. Thus, the polysystem theory is particularly suitable for the study of C-E TGC.

#### 4. Refinement and expansion

When applying polysystem theory to C-E TGC research, the theory still needs to be further refined and expanded according to the characteristics of C-E TGC.

On the one hand, further refinement of a polysystem is needed. The polysystem theory is not perfect. Even-Zohar’s commitment to finding out the universal laws of the literary system (later on, the cultural system) to highlight the commonality of multiple systems, has led to a tendency of the theory to be abstract and simplistic. The study fails to further classify subsystems such as political, ideological, economic, literary, and linguistic systems<sup>[8]</sup>. Therefore, in the study of specific issues, there are still many gaps to be filled in the polysystem theory. For example, some questions are raised:

- (1) What are the co-existing systems with which the C-E TGC system overlaps in the translation system or within a larger cultural system?
- (2) What are the effects of these overlaps?

To this point, Zha M (2015) raises similar questions:

- (1) Which systems are most closely related to the literary translation system?
- (2) How do these systems affect the position of the translated literature system within the larger cultural system?<sup>[12]</sup>

Even Even-Zohar I (1990a) himself recognizes that “Segal (1982) was correct in his observation that the polysystem theory was born in my writings without having to address any specific issues”<sup>[7]</sup>. Therefore, in the study of C-E TGC, the study has yet to take the theory as a framework, integrating it with other scholars’ findings, to further clarify which co-existing systems overlap with the C-E TGC system and to examine how the overlapping systems interact with each other and thus influence the practice of translation.

On the other hand, C-E TGC research needs to include the SL cultural system. Even-Zohar mainly examines the position of translated literature in the polysystem of the TL literature and the influence of its position on translation norms but fails to include the SL cultural system in his observation. That is due to the fact that in Western countries, “Translations are made from a foreign language into the mother tongue, with few exceptions”<sup>[13]</sup>. However, C-E TGC involves national image construction, so C-E TGC translators are mainly

Chinese. One of the reasons is only Chinese people can thoroughly understand Chinese culture and national conditions. As Fairbank JK *et al.* (1990) put it, China is not to be interpreted solely in Western terms (language shift), but its events and developments must be understood in its internal context <sup>[14]</sup>.

Another reason lies in the fact that C-E TGC is meant to present to people all over the world an accurate and comprehensive picture of an authentic, friendly China that actively participates in world affairs. As Yao Y (2014) said, all countries' global communication-oriented translations shoulder the important task of safeguarding national interests and winning international support <sup>[15]</sup>. The construction of China's discourse system and the building of China's international image are inseparable from C-E TGC, so only Chinese translators can truly understand China, describe its development and explain its phenomena to the world. Based on the above analysis, it can be seen that the objects of C-E TGC are Chinese cultural phenomena and the translators are Chinese, so the influence of the Chinese cultural system on C-E TGC can never be ignored. On this premise, the study of C-E TGC must include the cultural system of the source language.

#### 4. Conclusion

To make the world understand China better and view its development from a positive perspective, the study of C-E TGC has been attached with increasing attention, but the depth of the study have yet to be expanded. Based on the above analysis, the polysystem theory is applicable and suitable for C-E TGC research, which can place international publicity-oriented translation behavior under a multi-dimensional and dynamic research framework. It is observed how the coexisting subsystems in the larger cultural system influence and constrain the C-E TGC subsystem through movement and conflict. However, in view of the simplistic and abstract tendency of the polysystem theory, it is important to further improve and expand it. The study includes the SL cultural system to help translators more accurately grasp the characteristics of C-E TGC by analyzing the overlapping influences of various systems behind the phenomenon. This will be the direction of the future research.

#### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

#### References

- [1] Cai S, 2023, The Reception of Pearl S. Buck's Translation of "All Men Are Brothers" in the English-speaking World, thesis, Beijing Foreign Studies University.
- [2] Dai C, 2023, A Study on the Japanese Translation of "The Biography of Li Wa" from the Perspective of Literary Polysystems, thesis, Guizhou University.
- [3] Wang H, Wang Y, 2023, Insights into the Dissemination Mode of Chinese Literature under the Perspective of Polysystem Theory: A Case Study of Howard Goldblatt's Translation of Mo Yan's Novels. *Overseas English*, 2023(18): 34–36 + 45.
- [4] Xu Y, 2023, Research on the Dissemination and Reception of "Dream of the Red Chamber" in Mid-Meiji Japan, thesis, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies.
- [5] Peng W, 2023, Characteristics and Reflections on Translation for Global Communication from the Perspective of Polysystem Theory. *Overseas English*, 2023(18): 22–24.
- [6] Xing S, 2024, A Study on Hua Hangfang's Technological Translation from the Perspective of Polysystem Theory.

Chinese Science & Technology Translation, 37(2): 54–57 + 65.

- [7] Even-Zohar I, 1990a, Introduction to Polysystem Studies. *Poetics Today*, 1–6.
- [8] Zhang N, 2001, A Refined Version of Polysystem Theory Designed for Translation Studies. *Chinese and Foreign Literature*, 2001(3): 173–189.
- [9] Even-Zohar I, 1997, Factors and Dependencies in Culture: A Revised Draft for Polysystem Culture Research. *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 24(1): 15–34.
- [10] Even-Zohar I, 1990b, The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem. *Poetics Today*, 45–51.
- [11] Zhang N, 2001, From the Margins to the Center: Examining the Past and Future of Chinese Translation Studies from the Perspective of Polysystem Theory. *Foreign Languages*, 2001(4): 61–69.
- [12] Zha M, 2015, Integration of Polysystem Theory and the Expansion of Research on the History of Translated Literature. *Journal of Shanghai University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2015(3): 126–140.
- [13] Pan W, 2004, Translation in and out: On the Significance of Chinese Scholars Engaging in English Translation of Chinese Classics. *Chinese Translators*, 2004(2): 40–43.
- [14] Fairbank JK, MacFarquhar R, (Eds.), 1990, *The Cambridge History of China (1949-1965)*. China Social Sciences Press, Beijing.
- [15] Yao Y, 2014, *History of China's International Publicity in the New Era*. Tsinghua University Press, Beijing.

**Publisher's note**

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.