

A Discussion on Lin Shu's *The Lady of the Camellias* and Its Reinterpretation of Western Literature

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Abstract:

In the mid-to-late 19th century, with the colonial expansion of imperial countries, capitalist culture and literature had a vital impact on Late Qing Society. The book *The Lady of the Camellias* translated by Lin Shu in 1899 was deeply influenced by the transition between old and new cultures. It not only revealed how Lin Shu thought about western literature, but also illustrated how economy and politics played a significant role in the development of Chinese traditional literature. This paper aims to analyse the changes in characterization and core conflict through the comparison between Lin Shu's translation and Alexandre Dumas's book *La Dame aux Camélias*. In the process of analysis, the author implements several results and demonstrates reasons and influences of the translation such as the effect of social environment and Lin Shu's choice. Additionally, the author detects the integration of Chinese and Western culture and compares the textual content of *La Dame aux Camélias* with Chinese translation.

Keywords: Lin Shu, Chinese modern literature, *La Dame aux Camélias*.

1. Introduction

With commodity export and capital export of Western countries in the Late Qing Society, grand changes in social structures and commodity markets objectively promoted Chinese modernization. The Qing government was forced to agree on the trade exchange, which led to the spread of capitalist systems and ideologies in China. Advanced intellectuals introduced those books and theories, which caused great cultural shock. Lin Shu, who was the first to translate western literature utilized his unique and special way to rec-

reate *La Dame aux Camélias* as he translated foreign novels through the narrations of others.

The Lady of the Camellias was the most famous representative work of Lin Shu. He changed plenty of original content and reimagined this novel in the form of Classical Chinese. His reinterpretation was the symbol of reflecting and integrating when Chinese culture faced external culture. Meanwhile, Lin Shu's work considerably affected Chinese modern translation.

Existing research largely focuses on analyzing Lin Shu's translations and elaborating on the multiple

factors influencing his work. For instance, Li Zhen, in *The 'Non-Translator' Lin Shu and the Misinterpretations of 'Lin's Translated Novels': A Reinterpretation*, emphasizes Lin Shu's multifaceted identity as a writer, painter, and translator, highlighting the significant impact of his artistic background on his translation process [1]. From a literary perspective, Lu Wenting, in *The Translation and Dissemination Strategies of The Lady of the Camellias by Lin Shu*, examines how Lin Shu's translation of *The Lady of the Camellias* introduced a wave of Romanticism that influenced modern Chinese literature and society [2]. Meanwhile, An Yixuan, in *The Lady of the Camellias and Lin Shu's Views on Love*, focuses on analyzing how Lin Shu's personal views on love are reflected in his translation of *The Lady of the Camellias* [3].

This paper intends to compare and analyze the differences of languages, contents and culture between translation and original vision. Furthermore, it also focuses on analyzing the background and content of Lin Shu's recreations, exploring the influence of Western thought on Classical Chinese writing and examining the integration of Chinese and Western civilizations during the transitional era of old and new.

2. The Comparisons of the Contents

There are a number of differences, and the author would analyze in specific details.

2.1 Sinicization and Localization

Lin Shu's translation reflected the characteristics of the Times as his pattern could not be copied now. He did not learn any foreign languages, therefore, others who mastered the foreign languages such as overseas students told him about the contents of those novels [4]. Then Lin Shu translated it into Chinese and changed lots of contents. The plot conveyed through the narration of others, could naturally differ from the original *The Lady of the Camellias*. Moreover, Lin Shu's adaptations further sinicized and localized the Chinese translation, making it more aligned with Chinese cultural and literary traditions.

In terms of the characterization of the heroine, Marguerite, in the first chapter of Lin Shu's vision, he described Marguerite in this way, “修眉媚眼, 脸犹朝霞, 发黑如漆覆额头……[5]” He refers to a classical Chinese beauty instead of a French beautiful lady. Also, her hair color has been changed from blonde to black, and the heroine's ethnicity has been completely altered. Furthermore, his adaptations hide her true occupation as a prostitute whereas Alexandre Dumas Fils portrays it in a more straightforward and obvious manner.

In *La Dame aux Camélias*, “tracez un nez fin, droit, spi-

rituel, aux narines un peu ouvertes par une aspiration ardente vers la vie sensuelle; dessinez une bouche régulière, dont les lèvres s'ouvriraient gracieusement sur des dents blanches comme du lait; colorez la peau d'un velouté qui couvre les pêches qu'aucune main n'a touchées...[6]” This passage is direct and explicit, perfectly aligning with Marguerite's identity as a courtesan. Descriptions such as her “delicate nose,” “nostrils slightly flaring with a longing for a life of sensual pleasures,” “teeth as milk,” and “velvety skin” not only highlight Marguerite's stunning beauty but also vividly reflect her indulgent and hedonistic lifestyle. In just a few sentences, the image of a courtesan is deeply memorized by the readers, which is extremely impressive and vivid.

2.2 Relevant to the Social Environment

The basic demand for translation is faithful to the original text, while Lin Shu's translations hold an important place in the literary and translation fields closely related to the specific historical context of his time. Researching Lin Shu's translation could not estimate its value through accuracy, while profoundly studying it connected with his own personality and social environment.

Lin Shu was born in 1852 and passed away in 1924. During his lifetime, the society of China has experienced abundant reforms and revolutions. From the end of the Qing Dynasty to the New Culture Movement, his mind and attitude about society have been contiguously altered. The transformation of political systems, the emergence of social ideologies, and the revolutionary movements of the people constantly reshaped Lin Shu's reflections on society.

He translated courtesan into “勾栏女子”, which means a woman who worked in an entrapment district in ancient China. Additionally, this change undermined the sensual depiction. He deleted plenty of descriptions about Marguerite's debauched behavior and conduct.

2.2.1 Weakening the identity as a courtesan

As for the identity of the heroine, “Elle était une de ces femmes qu'on ne peut aimer qu'avec honte et dont on ne peut se faire aimer qu'avec incrédulité” Dumas wrote, which compared to “此女娇美无比, 然性情飘忽, 时常令人难以测度。” in Lin Shu's translation. Lin only highlighted the outstanding beauty of Marguerite and the unpredictable nature.

2.2.2 The description of the disease

“Elle semblait mourir d'une de ces maladies mystérieuses que donnent les excès de la vie et les nuits d'orgie.” Dumas wrote. In Lin Shu's translation vision, it was “其病渐深, 医者束手”。

Lin Shu completely deleted the mysterious death reason and simplified the expression of serious illness.

2.2.3 The love between the male and female protagonists

The scene in Lin Shu's translation in which Marguerite first met Armand was totally different from the original vision written by Dumas.

"Marguerite me regarda d'un air qui semblait vouloir dire: encore un qui me paiera peut-être mes dettes." Dumas wrote, while Lin Shu translated "玛氏初见余, 态颇轻佻, 然终不失端庄之姿"。

Marguerite regards Armand as a person who could help her improve her economic situations. However, Lin Shu expresses her attitude to money in a frivolous manner instead of a direct aim. Moreover, Lin Shu added "不失端庄之姿" in order to beautify her image.

2.2.4 The past background of Marguerite

In terms of the life before Marguerite fell in love with Armand, Lin Shu made the cuts more obvious.

"Elle avait eu des amants nombreux, des nuits de débauche et des fêtes où le vin et l'amour avaient coulé comme un fleuve." Dumas clearly mentioned that Marguerite had lots of lovers, while Lin Shu refused to admit this fact. He wrote "其昔日交游甚广, 虽繁华若梦, 然皆过眼云烟", which completely remove the description of a night of debauched passion and transformed the passion into a lament for a lavish life.

In Lin Shu's translation, he commonly utilized a strategy of widespread abridgment, implicitness, and beautification to shape the main character. It not only suits the acceptable level of Late Qing readers, but also reflects the moral inclination of Lin Shu. Marguerite was a character who was full of tragic color rather than complicated images. It is the essence that Lin Shu and his school of literature chose as well as the value orientation that traditional Chinese people preferred. Moreover, courtesans are not allowed to be a principal character of Chinese Classical literature.

Lin Shu altered the social life that appeared in Paris but did not occur in Qing Dynasty. For example, he reduces some descriptions of brilliant clothing and daily life in Paris.

2.3 Secularization in translation

In Lin Shu's vision, the fidelity of Marguerite is the faithfulness to "father" and social ethics and morality whereas faithfulness to the love and god, which makes it become the core distinction. Lin Shu created a new characteristic that corresponded to the image of fidelity in traditional Chinese ethics and morality [7]. This alteration empha-

sizes that Lin Shu is determined to incorporate his own moral values into translation. Lin Shu, in his translations, aligned "God" with "Father" and equated religious beliefs with social ethics and morality [8]. This paper will analyze this approach from the following perspectives.

2.3.1 The relationship between Marguerite with Armand's father

In *The Lady of the Camellias*, Alexandre Dumas fils writes: "J'avais fait ce sacrifice pour un père qui, en me remerciant, m'appelait sa fille." However, Lin Shu makes certain alterations in his translation: "余一念慈父抚孤之恩, 竟忍痛决别, 以成人伦之美." In the original text, Marguerite agrees to leave Armand due to a request from Armand's father and a desire to secure Armand's future. This sacrifice reflects her gradual shift toward considerations of ethics and morality, but it is primarily a rational thought of love.

2.3.2 Marguerite's Fidelity Shifting Toward Ethics and Morality

In the original text, Marguerite exclaims, "Dieu sait combien j'ai prié pour lui, pour vous et pour moi!" However, in Lin Shu's translation, this becomes: "天知余愧悔旧日之行, 惟盼此后不负纲常" Marguerite's love for Armand, though tormented, is loyal, and her prayers manifest her fidelity to their love and a request for God's forgiveness for her past life. This highlights her inner repentance and her connection to religious faith.

2.3.3 Marguerite's Sacrifice

In *Alexandre Dumas* fils' original text, Marguerite says, "Je t'aime assez pour préférer ton bonheur à celui qui me reste" In Lin Shu's translation, however, the line becomes: "我爱汝至深, 然一念汝家训教, 恐损汝前程, 故别去." Marguerite leaves Armand because she realizes her existence would ruin his future. This sacrifice is a rational expression of pure love, showing her fidelity to their relationship through selfless devotion.

2.3.4 Marguerite's Final Repentance

In the original text, Marguerite's dying words are: "Peut-être Dieu me pardonnera-t-il d'avoir aimé plus que de croire" In Lin Shu's translation, this becomes: "惟愿天鉴余此生多舛, 然守礼成全, 亦不负此心。"

This final monologue expresses her unwavering commitment to love and her reverence for religion. Marguerite equates love to a pure force similar to religious faith, manifesting her belief in the sanctity of love.

Dumas wrote *The Lady of the Camellias* to satirize the luxurious life of the middle and upper class in France, and criticize the hypocrisy and mammonish of the bourgeoisie.

In Lin Shu's translation vision, the protagonist Marguerite is sanctified and reinterpreted to relate to the traditional values of women in Chinese society. This reflects that, although Lin Shu was among the first Chinese scholars to know Western literature and thought, he still adhered to the moral standards of Confucian and Neo-Confucian philosophy.

Lin Shu's refusal to admit Marguerite's identity as a courtesan fundamentally diverges from the essence of Alexandre Dumas fils' *The Lady of the Camellias*. In the original, Marguerite's role as a courtesan is core to the plot, intensifying the conflict between Armand and his father and highlighting the core question of the novel: Why must genuine emotions succumb to the decaying, materialistic values of society? Lin Shu, however, shifts the conflict away from the courtesan identity, reframing the conflict not around social corruption but around the idea that love hinders the male protagonist's ability to achieve success for himself, his family and society. This reinterpretation of the father-son conflicts is often seen within the framework of traditional Chinese ethics and familial hierarchy.

3. The Background and Influence of Lin Shu's Translation

The recreation of Lin Shu was intensively affected by time and society. It was in 1897 that Lin Shu started his translation, when only one year before The Hundred Day's Reform. At that time, The Self-Strengthening Movement had already failed, and the degree of semi-colonial and semi-feudal exploitation continued to deepen. A variety of western ideologies and doctrines has been spread in China, while different classes supported various theories, which caused significant arguments and conflicts through literature and newspapers. The main leaders of The Hundred Day's Reform named Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei actively encouraged the emperor Guangxu to reform the whereas the Manchu aristocracy aimed to maintain the autocratic monarchy.

Chinese intellectuals explore new methods to promote the development of society, which is not limited to the western technology. They gradually realized that only improving citizens' thoughts could strengthen the whole country. Therefore, Lin Shu's translation emerged in response to the needs of the area.

Lin Shu is a traditional intellectual, who advocates for the Tongcheng School's classic prose. However, he does not always support the government of Qing dynasty. He encourages to establish female school and children school to improve the average knowledge level of China. After the Hundred Days' Reform, he leaned toward conservatism

and became a supporter of the emperor. His conservative political tendency indirectly influenced the literary world's evaluation of him. During the New Culture Movement, which promoted vernacular literature and, Lin Shu and other classical literature scholars faced criticism from the new intellectuals.

From the comparisons of the texts, Lin Shu greatly changed the original text, but his translation is deeply influenced by western literature, by extension, Chinese literary creation. For instance, this influence is reflected in the development of vernacular "new poetry" during the New Culture Movement, as well as innovations in novels and essays [9].

While Western works were being "Sinicized" classical prose also underwent reform due to the arrival of Western ideas, thereby achieving true cultural exchange and mutual learning.

In Lin Shu's translation, his words are not always the same as in traditional literatures. Traditional classical prose was typically characterized by strict structure and meticulous parallelism. However, his translation unexpectedly adopted the more free style of vernacular fiction, starting a new mode of expression in classical prose writing. This shift also paved the way for the later vernacular reform during the New Culture Movement. For instance, this sentence: "次日阿尔巴回, 玛丽垂首, 不发一语, 彼笑而慰之, 竟欢甚。" Lin Shu described Marguerite's behavior in a simple way, using some words to express her mind and emotion, which is different from the traditional prose as it is more complicated to use more foreshadowings.

The dialogue also shows a trend toward vernacular language: "玛丽道: '君即不来, 我死矣!' 阿尔巴答曰: '适有所阻, 故未及来。'" The dialogue departs from the traditional Classical Chinese forms of "云", "曰", or "道", instead adopting a more colloquial style with phrases like "我死矣" and "适有所阻". This conversational tone is natural and unpretentious, lacking the rigid parallelism of classical prose, and related more closely to the expressive style of dialogues in vernacular fiction.

At the same time, traditional classical prose writing often focused on criticizing current events and expressing personal opinions and aspirations about the society. In contrast, *The Lady of the Camellias* analyzing the most genuine human emotions and desires, demonstrating that love could also be written a central theme in literary creation. This meant that a significant step in the reform and innovation of literary content.

The popularity of *The Lady of the Camellias* also promoted changes in literary creation. Late Qing novels began to break away from the traditional Scholar-and-Beauty narratives, such as *The Romance of West Chamber*, while stories similar to *The Lady of the Camellias* began to

emerge in great numbers.

Lin Shu's *The Lady of the Camellias* had a far-reaching impact. As the first modern Chinese translation of a Western literary work, it provided Chinese society with an avenue to understand Western literature and thought [10]. Although there were significant adaptations, the love story between the protagonist and the heroine still criticized the norms of a society governed by Confucian ethics and propriety. Lin Shu's translation, influenced subsequent literary writers and contributed to the development and modernization of modern Chinese literature.

4. Conclusion

Lin Shu's translation of *The Lady of the Camellias* was the first Western literary work introduced into China through translation. It not only accelerated the dissemination of Western literature in modern China but also influenced traditional classical prose writing. Although Lin Shu's translation was marked by significant limitations of its time and did not strictly adhere to the principle of being the same as the original texts, his creative reinterpretation of Western literature fostered cultural exchange and mutual learning.

This paper conducts an in-depth comparative study of Lin Shu's *The Lady of the Camellias* and *Alexandre Dumas fils*' original work, employing methods of close textual reading and comparative analysis. Based on these two works, the study analyzes how Lin Shu adjusted the content of the original to suit the cultural background and readership of late Qing society, as well as the impact of these adaptations on character portrayal, thematic expression, and narrative style.

The findings reveal that Lin Shu's translation practice was not merely a linguistic transformation but also a reconstruction of culture and ethics. By deleting sensual descriptions, downplaying religious elements, and emphasizing ethical values and filial piety, Lin Shu successfully transformed the complex character of Marguerite from Dumas' work into a "virtuous and loyal woman" in Con-

fuian ethics of late Qing society.

Future research could further investigate Lin Shu's portrayal of female characters in his translations.

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