

The Translation of Russian Literature in Republican China

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Which Russian writers were read in pre-Communist China? How, why and by whom were Russian books translated into Chinese? This article re-examines these seemingly settled questions, to argue that a fresh look long overdue.

By Mark Gamsa

The place of Russian literature in twentieth-century China is widely acknowledged, and receives obligatory mention in most Western studies of modern Chinese literature. Research on Russian-Chinese literary contacts in the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China has concentrated on nineteenth-century and Soviet literature to produce numerous studies on the translation and reception of Alexander Pushkin and Maxim Gorky. Far less attention has been given to early twentieth-century Russian writers who did not accept the October Revolution and emigrated or stopped writing in its wake. Some of these writers were widely read and translated during the republican era; at the same time, the alleged popularity of Soviet socialist realism in China has been greatly exaggerated.

As an introduction to the subject one can still recommend Mark Shneider's book *Russkaia klassika v Kitae* (1977). Despite its obligatory conformance to the ideological agenda of the time and failure to cover much of the relevant Chinese material, this was reliable and accurate work by a Sinologist equally at home in Russian and Chinese literature. The same cannot be said about the only monograph in English, *The Russian Hero in Modern Chinese Fiction* by Ng Mau-sang (1988). Ng did not use Russian sources, and he overburdened his evidence in his attempts to demonstrate the direct influence of Russian authors on famous Chinese writers from Lu Xun to Ba Jin.

The first translations of Russian literature into classical Chinese appeared in the early 1900s. The publication in 1909 of the anthology *Yuwai xiaoshuo ji* (Stories from Abroad) by the brothers Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren, future giants of modern Chinese literature who at the time were still students in Japan, remained unnoticed by the reading public. An enthusiasm for Russian fiction accompanied the May Fourth movement for a new literature in the vernacular language and was reflected in a peak of translation activity in the early 1920s. As the Chinese literary scene became increasingly leftist in the late 1920s, China's most prominent translators shifted their attention towards socialist literature in the Soviet Union. This trend intensified during the Anti-Japanese War and persisted until the establishment of the People's Republic; as the promotion of the Soviet model became official policy in the 1950s, socialist fiction and the pre-revolutionary Russian classics were vigorously translated and introduced, up until the rupture in Soviet-Chinese relations in 1962.

All foreign literature came under attack in China during the Cultural Revolution. The translation of Soviet, then of classical, Russian literature was resumed only after the fall of the 'Gang of Four'. Since the late 1980s Chinese readers have been slowly renewing their acquaintance with the literature commonly (if inaccurately) known as the 'Russian Silver Age': the work of writers first introduced in China in the 1920s, but overshadowed by 'proletarian fiction' in the 1930s and never translated again after 1949.

Writers of the 'Silver Age'

An example of this process is the Chinese destiny of Leonid Andreev (1871–1919), in his last years an outspoken enemy of the Bolshevik regime and among the best-known Russian writers in the first two decades of the 20th century. Two of his stories were translated by Lu Xun in 1909. From 1917 to 1950, twenty-eight other titles (including short stories, novellas and theatre plays) appeared in Chinese translation, about a third of these becoming available in more than a single version.¹ No new translations were published in China between February 1950 and 1981, when interest in the translation and interpretation of Andreev was revived. With the rediscovery of 'Silver Age' literature, this interest is now at its peak, as many recent publications attest.

Another Lu Xun favourite, the writer Mikhail Artsybashev (1878–1927) counted thirteen titles in Chinese from 1920 to

1946. Among these, Artsybashev's most famous novel *Sanin* was translated six times, three different versions appearing within five months in 1930. Like Andreev, Artsybashev spent the last years of his life as an émigré opposed to the Soviet state; after decades of denunciation by both Soviet and Chinese literary historians, his books had to wait until the early 1990s to be published in his own country. Russian readers can now choose between half a dozen recent editions of *Sanin*, while three translations published in 2001, 2002 and 2003 are available in Chinese bookstores.² These signs of reader demand make all the more obvious the need to look back to the translation corpus of the republican period, and to recognize that previous misrepresentation of the place occupied in it by early twentieth-century Russian writers stemmed from reasons that had to do neither with these writers' original importance in the reception of Russian literature in China, nor indeed with the quality of their work.

Literary translation

A panoramic view of the translation of Russian literature in republican China may be arrived at through the detailed examination of three aspects: technique, ideology and practice. This division defines the objectives of studying 'literary translation' to encompass the textual product of the translator's work, the function of translation in the recipient culture and the position of the translator therein.

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Technique is to be understood as the whole range of decisions that translators make in the course of their work. Only two among the most productive translators in the republican period were able to draw directly on Russian sources: Geng Jizhi (1899–1946) and Cao Jinghua (1897–1987), specialists respectively in classical and Soviet fiction. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Chinese translations of Russian literature were done predominantly on the basis of English texts, and to a lesser extent through other intermediary languages such as German, French and Japanese. Identifying the intermediary text is useful for distinguishing the modifications that a Russian work absorbed at each stage of its way to the Chinese reader. A comparison of the original, intermediary and Chinese versions often reveals the latter as faithful translations of texts already edited or shortened in the previous stage. Led by Lu Xun, adherents of New Literature in the 1920s tended toward high literalism while devising strategies to tackle the practical problems of re-translation. Freer versions and adaptations were produced by translators more oriented to the demands of the book market.

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Ideology may be broadly applied to cover the motivation for translating, as well as the choice and interpretation of foreign texts. Two kinds of sources become essential, even as the limited availability of Chinese translations and republican-era periodicals in libraries outside of China implies that the search for the first kind, in particular, will require some effort. The first are the notes, introductions and afterwords that translators frequently appended to their texts. The second are reviews, critical essays and similar publications in the contemporary press. Studying these sources to trace the reception of Russian writers by their translators and readers, and with the aim of understanding the function which translation was meant to fulfil, we may discover that our findings also shed new light on the original texts.



Cover of the story collection *The Little Angel* by Leonid Andreev (Shanghai: Guanghai shuju, 1928), in the translation of Yao Pengzi (1905–70)

Practice refers to translating as an occupation seen in its social and historical context. Typically, the work of an individual translator may be traced to a social or a family circle, to a group associated with a specific journal, or to a literary society in which translation was a common and, in that sense, collective activity. More so than literary translation from other languages, the translation of Russian literature in China should be considered against the changing political background, and the special expectations from the Soviet Union which were shared by some of the translators and parts of their reading audience. At the height of the enthusiasm for Russian fiction in the 1920s, many of the translators were leading figures of the Chinese literary scene. While, by the end of the decade, these pioneers were seeking guidance in Soviet literature, other less famous hands went on acquainting Chinese readers with those authors who did not carry the banner of the Revolution. The continuing appeal of non-socialist twentieth century Russian writing during the last two decades of the republican era is one of the many untold stories of the translation and reception of Russian literature in China. <

Notes

1. Twenty titles in all are mentioned in the pioneering chapter on Andreev in Shneider 1977.
2. The version newly published in Shenyang in 2003 is a reprint of the first Chinese translation of any Artsybashev work in the PRC period, the 1988 *Sanin* by Wang Zhi.

References

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For further interest:

David E. Pollard, ed., 1998. *Translation and Creation: Readings of Western Literature in Early Modern China, 1840–1918*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Thomas Kampen's summary of Zou Zhenhuan, *Yingxiang Zhongguo jindai shehui de yibai zhong yizuo* (One Hundred Translated Works that have Influenced Modern Chinese Society; Beijing, 1996). Listing titles available at the Institute of Chinese Studies, University of Heidelberg. <http://sun.sino.uni-heidelberg.de/library/100transl.htm>