

Research Article

Reviewing Critical Translation Theory: New Ideas for Writing Translation History

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Abstract

This article explores the implications of Lydia H. Liu's *Critical Translation Theory* for the study of translation history, examining its theoretical framework, methodological approaches, and the challenges it poses to traditional historiography of translation. It begins with an overview of existing research on translation history, highlighting the limitations of conventional approaches and tracing recent scholarly discussions on critically rewriting translation history. The article then focuses on Liu's theoretical contributions. Drawing on interdisciplinary tools from history, semiotics, and postcolonial theory, Liu reveals the dynamic role of translation in the production of power, culture, and knowledge. Her critical translation theory not only offers a set of critical tools for translation historians, but also prompts a rethinking of translation's role in global cultural exchange and power negotiations. Liu's methodological innovations facilitate a shift in translation history research from a history of linguistic transfer to a history of power relations and knowledge production, thus providing both theoretical resources and practical pathways for rewriting the history of translation.

Keywords

Critical Translation Theory, Translation Historiography, Cross-cultural Power Dynamics, New Translation History

1. Introduction

History is defined in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (2019) as “the discipline that records and studies events (affecting a nation or people) in chronological order, accompanied by a critical examination of primary sources and an interpretation of the causes of those events.” Human responses to events are both diachronic and synchronic: the past often shapes the decisions we make in the present. As Lane-Mercier has pointed out, an understanding of history is fundamentally important for any rigorous academic exploration of present-day phenomena. Translation and interpreting, being historical acts of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural commu-

nication, each carry their own significance and consequences. The intrinsic connection between translation and history, therefore, becomes readily apparent. [1] Since the 1970s, a major paradigm shift in translation studies has redefined conceptions of translation historiography. It is within this context that Chinese scholars have called for a “rewriting of translation history” [2] and the development of a “new translation history” [3]. Against this academic backdrop, drawing on historical insights is crucial for expanding the frontiers of contemporary translation studies. To broaden the vision of translation historians and to enable thematic depth, method-

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ological innovation, and interdisciplinary engagement, it is imperative to focus on cultural exchange and reception. This entails close attention to developments in adjacent fields such as global translation history, cultural history, the New Historiography, the history of language contact, the history of the press, political history, and the history of legal and institutional translation [4]. From this perspective, history is seen as a system of signification in which “the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past “events into present historical “facts”. This perspective is not a dishonest evasion of truth, but rather, as Hutcheon suggests, a recognition of the fact that historical meaning is shaped by human constructs and their interpretive functions. [5]

In light of this, the present study focuses on a series of translation discourses by Chinese scholar Lydia H. Liu. Her original *Critical Translation Theory* is deeply influenced by various Western theories. In her research, she flexibly applies the historical perspective, research tools, and methodologies of historiography to the analysis of translation phenomena. Liu excels in embedding specific translation-related events within particular historical contexts, revealing the dynamic role of translation in power structures, culture, and knowledge production. Her translation theory, interwoven with studies of comparative literature and world history, though less frequently discussed today, provides a wealth of intellectual resources for innovative research in translation history.

2. The Development Direction of Translation History both in China and Abroad

2.1. Developments in Studies of Translation History Abroad

In the early nineteenth century, modern historiography advocated scientific objectivity and sought to reconstruct the past through objective recollection. As a result, historical writing tended to suppress multiplicity in favour of uniformity. Later, thanks to the critical perspectives introduced by scholars such as Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak, “history” was no longer seen as a linear process with a clear beginning and end. Instead, it came to be understood as an extremely complex and persistently problematic concept. Under these new historiographical perspectives, historical research began to focus on the use of language-language that is intimately bound up with power and is never neutral or innocent. History, in essence, is a representational practice—a continuous process of reconstruction. Consequently, the “truthfulness” of history is inseparable from the ways in which historical materials are interpreted and represented. This historiographical view has also been adopted in the field of translation history. Drawing

on Foucault’s theory of power, Paul Bandia has explicitly called for the urgent construction of a new form of translation history. He argues that the field must establish a more inclusive research paradigm—one that systematically incorporates marginalised voices into historical interpretation and avoids the epistemological dominance produced by researchers’ own culturally situated assumptions. This theoretical call directly addresses the long-standing historical limitations of the discipline of translation studies. Traditional translation practices have primarily served the standardisation of national languages or the construction of specific cultural identities, while theoretical models have been built upon binary oppositions, male-centred thinking, and Eurocentrism. These structural flaws have rendered existing frameworks inadequate for explaining the emergence of “empowerment-oriented translation” in contemporary practice—translation practices that aim to secure discursive agency for culturally marginalised groups. It is worth noting that recent research in translation history has begun to incorporate the historical dimensions of the “Other” into theoretical considerations. [5] These innovative studies also highlight the special value of translation as a mode of knowledge production: through close reading and critical reinterpretation of texts within their historical contexts, translation can not only correct distortions in received historical narratives but also effectively counteract cultural bias—thus offering renewed energy for disciplinary renewal in both history and translation studies.

2.2. Progress in Studies of Translation History in China

In China’s academic community, new reflections on the study of translation history have also begun to emerge. Qu Wensheng reviewed the major achievements in China’s translation history research over the 40 years since the reform and opening-up, while also pointing out its limitations and the vast space for further exploration. [4] Under the cultural perspective, the agency of translation activities has become increasingly prominent in both major and minor historical events, revealing the shortcomings of traditional views on translation history. As early as the late 1980s, Xie Tianzhen proposed the idea of rewriting translation history [6]. Li Jinshu summarized the existing problems in translation history into four key points:

- 1) Outdated concepts: Translation history is overly dependent on political history, following its chronological narrative, resulting in a lack of research momentum.
- 2) Weak theoretical interpretation: The focus is primarily on compiling translation materials and describing historical facts, with insufficient cultural analysis, making it difficult to reveal the deeper cultural texture of translation practices.
- 3) Narrow scope: Literary translation history dominates

the field, leaning towards grand narratives and elitism, which obscures translation history in other domains and conceals its richness and complexity.

- 4) Limited methodology: The field heavily relies on historical materials while neglecting interpretation, lacking a comprehensive, interdisciplinary perspective [7].

These issues form the basis of the call for "rewriting translation history." Some Chinese scholars have already begun exploring new paths in translation history research. The materials, methodologies, and approaches in translation history studies are moving toward an interdisciplinary and culture-focused direction. For instance, Professor Wang Hongzhi's new book *Dialogue Between the Dragon and the Lion: Translation and the Macartney Mission to China and Asymmetry and Inequality*, edited by Professor Qu Wensheng, exemplify these new research trends.

Regarding new approaches to translation history research, Qu Wensheng [2] proposed the concept of a "New Translation History" (NTH). In his article *How Is "New Translation History" Possible?—On the Relationship Between Translation and Historiography*, he introduced the theoretical frameworks of New Historicism and Translation Studies, arguing that "the best perspective for observing the interaction and mutual influence between translation and historical research may lie within these frameworks." Similarly, Xu Jun advocated for a comprehensive approach to translation history research, emphasizing that "issues such as translation ethics, translation motivations, translation environments, influencing factors, and the functions of translation can be more objectively analyzed through a holistic historical perspective." [8] Li Jinshu suggested that the "rewriting of translation history" can be innovated from three aspects: *concepts, boundaries, and subject matter* [7]. These theoretical insights and methodological propositions have significantly broadened the research frontiers of translation history in terms of theory, method, perspective, and materials. Traditional translation history research has evident limitations, particularly in its academic expressiveness within the discipline and its influence outside the field.

To address these limitations, translation history research should be reconsidered from the perspectives of *its essence, fundamental elements, research scope, and translation historiography*. Future translation history writing should diverge from traditional approaches. In this regard, Lydia H. Liu's translation studies provide the academic community with multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary inspirations for translation history research. Her *Critical Translation Theory* emphasizes translation as a dynamic process of knowledge production and cultural exchange. Its methodological features introduce new perspectives and analytical paths to translation history research, particularly in areas such as *power relations, cultural representation, and historical context*.

3. An Overview of "Critical Translation Theory"

Looking at the academic landscape both in China and internationally, there are two distinct research paths under the name of "critical translation" theories. The first is corpus-based critical translation studies, which is widely recognized in the Chinese translation studies community. This approach employs linguistic tools such as corpora and critical discourse analysis to conduct bottom-up descriptive analyses of translation phenomena. However, while corpus-based critical approaches focus on uncovering ideological patterns within texts through quantitative linguistic analysis, CTS is distinct in its theoretical orientation. CTS combines historical, semiotic, and political analysis to situate translation within broader socio-political structures and historical processes. Rather than concentrating solely on textual patterns, it interrogates translation as a material and discursive practice implicated in the production of power, culture, and knowledge. The second path, which is the focus of this paper, is considered by its pioneers to be a "byproduct" of cross-linguistic practice and the politics of imperial discourse. At the end of the 20th century, "critical" theories provided a powerful tool for breaking disciplinary boundaries in literary studies. Due to their emphasis on the opacity and realism of history, theories bearing the label "critical" tend to employ interdisciplinary theoretical tools to uncover the naturalized power consciousness embedded in texts. Lydia H. Liu's critical translation ideas are dispersed across her representative works, lectures, and interviews rather than systematically presented in a single theoretical monograph. She defines translation as a socially driven practice influenced by power relations and critically reexamines fundamental issues such as the circulation of meaning and translatability.

Liu argues that the idea that all languages are inherently connected, and that equivalent words naturally exist across different languages, is a universal illusion that philosophers, linguists, and translation theorists have struggled in vain to dispel. [9] Based on this logic, she continuously questions: What are the historical preconditions for translation? If meaning exists uniquely in each language, then in the collision of history and civilizations, what forces drive the circulation of knowledge and meaning across different linguistic systems? The process of exploring these questions, along with the answers she proposes, forms the core of Liu's translation discourse.

Although Chinese scholars have labeled her translation views as "New Translation Theory" [10] or "Cultural Translation Study" [11] Liu herself officially names her theoretical approach "Critical Translation Theories" on her Columbia University homepage. American scholar Douglas Robinson has also written extensively on this approach, referring to it as "Critical Translation Studies" (CTS). [12].

Notably, Liu's critical translation research is deeply embedded in historical inquiry. In constructing her Critical

Translation Theory, she engages in profound dialogues with history and expands the boundaries of translation studies through disciplines such as semiotics, postcolonial studies, and Marxist political economy. She has also coined four key concepts that have significantly shaped the field: translanguaging practice, cross-writing, tokens of exchange, and super-sign.

By tracing the movement of heterogeneous languages and different cultures, Liu's critical translation research repositions translation within history as a cultural act. She emphasizes the translator's role in knowledge dissemination, diplomatic negotiations, and civilizational confrontations. The dynamics of cultural conflict, exchange, and migration are central concepts in the study of the history of Asian science and knowledge translation. As a record, study, and interpretation of past human events and activities, history greatly benefits from translation, which reveals the ways different societies and cultures attempt to understand and integrate with one another. However, Liu highlights a long-standing issue: "The dynamic relationship between translation and history has long been overlooked. It is only when written discourse involves referents such as imperialism or national sovereignty that evidence gains epistemological validity. The problem is that when historians encounter the issue of 'translation' in handling evidence, they either ignore it entirely or relegate translation to a secondary concern. As a result, many historians rely on simplistic methods in constructing textual evidence, leading to a common outcome—interpreting primary documents (whether in Chinese, English, Japanese, French, or any other language) solely based on their surface meanings. They take the text at face value. Consequently, in matters of diplomacy, this can result in misinterpretations of diplomatic negotiations, fostering the false impression that such affairs were conducted through a transparent mode of communication" [13]. Therefore, Liu's translation theory offers profound insights for the "rewriting of translation history" or the development of a "New Translation History." Her critical interpretations of fundamental translation issues challenge the linear and monolithic cultural exchange narratives in traditional translation history research. Her work promotes a paradigm shift in translation history studies from a history of linguistic conversion to a history of power relations and a history of knowledge production.

4. Lydia H. Liu's Approach to Translation History Research

An examination of Lydia H. Liu's translation research yields both specific methodologies and broader perspectives for the study of translation history. Her in-depth analysis of translation events in history not only breaks through the limitations of traditional translation history but also provides a deeper theoretical framework and practical methodology for exploring the multiple roles of translation in history, culture, and power dynamics.

4.1. Expanding the Scope of Translation History

Liu's distinctive understanding of translation history is reflected in her selection and interpretation of historical materials. In an interview, she remarked: "*I believe that the creation of theory must be grounded in historical documents and concrete texts. Only in this way can we grasp the foundation of theory-and, if I may say so, its very essence.*" [14] Accordingly, she emphasizes the value of marginal and non-mainstream historical materials, treating translated texts, prefaces, and publishing records as critical resources for understanding history. Through these materials, she reconstructs translation activities within their specific historical contexts, exploring their relationship with politics and culture.

In *The Clash of Empires: The Politics of Discourse in Colonial China*, Liu analyzes the translation processes of non-literary texts such as the *Treaty of Tianjin* and *Elements of International Law*, offering a fresh discursive perspective on these historical events. One of the most famous cases she examines is the mistranslation of the Chinese character "夷" (yí). Initially translated by the British as "foreigner", the term was later rendered as "夷/ barbarian", which Liu identifies as a *super-sign*—a signifier carrying ideological weight beyond its literal meaning. This shift reflects how colonial hegemony disrupted the Qing government's discursive authority. Liu draws a critical conclusion from this case: Translation is no longer a neutral event removed from the ideological struggles of contending interests." [13].

Similarly, the translation disputes surrounding *Elements of International Law* highlight the power struggles between the Qing court and Western imperial powers as they sought to establish and manipulate so-called "universal equivalents" in translation. This historical analysis underscores that translation is not based on the inherent equivalence between languages but rather on the *exchange value* and *universality* of meanings.

For example, when William A. P. Martin translated *Elements of International Law* into Chinese, he rendered "natural law" using existing Confucian philosophical concepts from Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, choosing the terms "性" (xìng, human nature) and "公" (gōng, public/universal). His goal was to establish a common conceptual foundation between two vastly different intellectual traditions. However, in this process of linguistic and semantic negotiation, these Confucian terms became partially detached from their original philosophical contexts. At the same time, "natural law" and "positive law", when translated as "性法" (xìng fǎ) and "公法" (gōng fǎ), also lost their original specificity within Western legal discourse:

"The Confucian concepts of '性' and '公' became partially estranged from their original philosophical contexts. Meanwhile, 'natural law' and 'positive law,' after being translated as '性法' and '公法,' also drifted away from the localized

and specific framework of Wheaton's legal discourse." [13].

In her book *Translingual Practice*, Liu explores the role of translation in constructing modern Chinese identity by examining late Qing translated texts and publishing records of Chinese intellectuals. The late Qing period was marked by external pressure from Western imperialism and internal demands for modernization, making translation a crucial tool for knowledge transmission and cultural transformation. Key examples she examines include: The evolution of the term "science" (科学, kēxué), which was originally translated as "格致学" (gēzhì xué, the study of investigating things) before becoming the modern term for science. The invention of the Chinese pronoun "她" (tā, the feminine form of "he"). The translation strategies used in *Rickshaw Boy* (骆驼祥子). The discursive shifts and struggles between the late Qing and Republican periods. Liu argues that these moments of linguistic transformation cannot be simply attributed to foreign influence or an inherent logic of local tradition: These moments and processes cannot be reduced to foreign influence, nor can they be simplified as the self-evident logic of indigenous tradition. [9].

By incorporating cultural history, discourse analysis, and translation studies, Liu's approach provides a new paradigm for translation history research—one that moves beyond traditional linguistic equivalence and instead traces the historical, ideological, and power-laden dynamics of translation.

4.2. Interdisciplinary Approaches in Liu's Translation History Research

Interdisciplinary research integrates theories, methods, and findings from multiple disciplines to conduct a comprehensive study of a given subject. Also referred to as "cross-disciplinary research," this approach is particularly relevant for translation history, which is not a self-contained discipline but rather one with inherently comparative characteristics. Effective translation history research requires collaboration across disciplines and a paradigm that transcends disciplinary boundaries. As Qu Wensheng [3] suggests, scholars should actively draw inspiration from historiography and other humanities and social sciences.

Liu's Critical Translation Theory, or CTS is highly interdisciplinary, incorporating a diverse mix of theoretical perspectives. In discussing translation issues, she integrates methods from history, linguistics, sociology, and cultural studies, constructing a multifaceted research approach. CTS is often regarded as a byproduct of comparative literature studies, and its exploration of translation's nature has introduced several novel concepts. For instance, Liu identifies terms that bridge cultural texts and economic realities, borrowing from economics with terms like "circulation," "negotiation," and "exchange" to explain how meanings move across different cultures. She also challenges the illusion of equivalence created by terms like "transmission" and "conversion" by introducing the X=Y translation formula, which

deconstructs traditional notions of linguistic equivalence. [14].

Liu incorporates art, consciousness, semiotics, and discourse practices into cultural systems while applying Thick Description to microhistorical translation events. For example, her analysis of the Morse Code case in the mid-19th century, which involved the phrase "Strike the Barbarians," is closely tied to Peirce's semiotics. Liu likens translation to the juxtaposition of two different sign systems, arguing that many terms in indigenous languages are products of this translation "juxtaposition," a process that is often concealed. Consequently, the complex interactions and mutual transformations between languages tend to be overlooked.

Fei Xiaoping has observed that Liu's translation studies, in a sense, are almost all textual applications of Foucault's "archaeology of knowledge". [11] Liu focuses on non-literary texts in historical conflicts and their underlying power structures, analyzing their origins and implications. In her study of Chinese knowledge and power from 1900 to 1937, She emphasizes that one of the key insights drawn from Foucault's work is the imperative to critically examine institutionalized practices and the entangled relationships between knowledge and power. These structures not only authorize specific forms of knowledge but also marginalize or silence alternative perspectives. [9] Using Foucault's "archaeology of knowledge" approach, Liu traces the historical emergence of concepts and discourses, analyzing how they acquire new meanings in different historical contexts. In *Translingual Practice*, she examines the translation evolution of terms like "science" and "democracy", demonstrating how these terms were reconstructed and incorporated into China's modern discourse. In *Tokens of Exchange*, she analyzes how translation participates in knowledge production and creates new meanings across cultural contexts. Liu also employs genealogical analysis, tracing the historical evolution of key concepts, terms, and translation phenomena to reveal their underlying power structures and cultural logic. In *The Clash of Empires*, she examines the translation of "barbarian" and other colonial terms, exposing how these translations contributed to the construction of asymmetrical cultural relations between China and the West. In *Translingual Practice*, she explores how "mistranslations" become opportunities for cultural creation, analyzing their political and cultural consequences through historical investigation.

4.3. Approach Based on Intersection of Philosophy and History

Liu's exploration of translation and history is closely aligned with New Historicism. Before poststructuralist historical theories like Michel Foucault's skepticism were applied to literary studies, many scholars adhered to the belief that historical research must "accurately" reconstruct the past with objectivity as its sole criterion [15]. However, the rise of New Historicism in the 1980s challenged this traditional

view. New Historicism integrates text, historical context, and cultural background, expanding the historical dimension of texts beyond their immediate background to include the reader's context, as well as social, cultural, and political coordinates. Its foundational stance revolves around "the historicity of texts" and "the textuality of history", which treats history as a narrative about past events rather than merely the events themselves. [15] This perspective has made New Historicism receptive to translation as a legitimate subject of historical research, treating translation as an integral part of historical inquiry rather than a marginal phenomenon [3]. The intersection between CTS and New Historicism is evident in their shared emphasis on:

The complexity of historical contexts,
The relationship between power and discourse,
A focus on marginalized and diverse perspectives.

For example, in *Translingual Practice*, Liu examines how late Qing intellectuals translated "science" and "democracy" to facilitate the spread of modern knowledge, demonstrating how both CTS and New Historicism reject the isolation of texts or translation phenomena and instead embed them within specific historical conditions to reveal their complexity.

A central path in Liu's research is the power-discourse analysis of translation. In tracing 19th-century translation history, she focuses intensely on the relationship between translation and power. Through Thick Description, she investigates how translation serves specific power structures or becomes a discursive tool in power struggles. Drawing from Foucault's "power-knowledge" theory, Liu analyzes the hidden power dynamics within translation activities. For example, in *The Clash of Empires*, she analyzes the translation of the Treaty of Nanjing, revealing how Britain used translation to construct asymmetrical power relations between China and England. By critically examining translation as a site of ideological struggle, Liu's research highlights how translation is not merely an act of linguistic transfer but an active force in shaping power structures and historical narratives.

5. The Reciprocal Influence of Translation History on Translation Theory

Lydia Liu, by tracing the history of translation, reconstructs and examines the intricate interplay between translation, culture, and power during several pivotal historical periods. Through this process, she develops original insights into the definition of translation and the circulation of meaning. Her wide-ranging arguments have, often unintentionally, yielded a number of valuable by-products-contributions that not only foster methodological innovation in translation historiography but also cast critical doubt on conventional translation theory. As Xu Jun has noted, "To truly understand translation, one must adopt a historical perspective and at-

tach importance to historical research on translation." [16] The intellectual by-products generated by Liu's investigations into cross-border, cross-linguistic practices and the collisions of imperial power may thus be seen as a kind of historiographical feedback that nourishes and revitalises theoretical inquiry.

5.1. Innovations in Translation Discourse

One of Liu's major contributions to translation studies is her critical redefinition of translatability. She challenges the assumption that text and diplomatic practice share an inherent relationship, emphasizing instead that their interaction must first be historically and discursively examined. As Liu states:

"Before assuming a direct or indirect connection between a translated text and its practical application, we must first analyze how meaning is produced between two linguistic-discursive systems. Such meaning may be the product of meticulous calculation or an unintended side effect." [13].

In other words, translatability should be critically assessed before translation even occurs. For example, Liu frequently discusses the translation of international law into Chinese during the late Qing dynasty. Here, translatability posed an enormous challenge: From a linguistic perspective, Western political terms had no direct equivalents in classical Chinese. From a historical perspective, the Qing government's conceptual framework was radically different from that of the West. Inspired by these challenges, Liu (1995) redefines translatability as a "hypothetical equivalence" between languages and the historical process of constructing this equivalence. [9].

This perspective has forced a reevaluation of many entrenched concepts in traditional translation theory, particularly in relation to: The circulation and creation of meaning, the role of translation in constructing universality, and the function of *super-signs* in reinforcing ideological power.

While Liu's Critical Translation Theory offers valuable insights into the entanglement of translation with power and ideology, it has also been critiqued for its predominant focus on elite discourse and Euro-Chinese power dyads. Such emphasis may risk overlooking translation practices that occur outside state-centered or intellectual networks, including those undertaken by grassroots activists, local communities, or religious groups. Moreover, CTS has paid limited attention to South-South translation dynamics, where translational flows between non-Western regions play crucial roles in shaping alternative modernities and regional solidarities. Addressing these limitations requires expanding CTS to incorporate the agency of non-state actors and to analyze translational exchanges within the Global South. This could involve integrating frameworks from postcolonial subaltern studies and South-South comparative literature to examine how translation functions in contexts of shared colonial his-

tories, economic dependency, or cultural affinity beyond Western hegemonic structures. Such an extension would enrich CTS by situating translation within multipolar and intersectional networks of power, moving beyond the Eurocentric or Sino-Western binaries that have often structured global translation studies.

5.2. The Materialist Exploration of Translation

Liu's research extends beyond linguistic analysis to encompass the broader socio-political and ideological conditions shaping translation. In doing so, she inaugurates what can be termed "Translation Materialism." Taking inspiration from Raymond Williams' "Cultural Materialism," this approach examines translation as a social and cultural process shaped by historical conditions and power structures. Liu's *Critical Translation Theory* (CTS) draws from a broad range of theoretical frameworks, including cultural studies, social history, feminist theory, western Marxism, structuralism and poststructuralism, Foucault's discourse and knowledge theories. Similar to Cultural Materialism, Liu's approach engages with the state's power and its resistance, re-evaluations of dominant ideologies and radical counter-discourses, the confrontation between marginalized and mainstream discourses, the feminist critique of literary power structures, intra-national class struggles and contemporary interpretations of power [17]. Liu's methodology closely aligns with this materialist trajectory. She analyzes translation as a site of cultural symptoms, incorporates historical and philosophical perspectives into translation research, reveals ideological structures embedded within translation practices, and expands the contemporary dimensions of translation studies.

Williams argued that cultural products are shaped by the structures of feeling and material realities of their time. Operationalizing this in translation studies involves examining how translation is conditioned by institutional forces, economic constraints, and ideological struggles. Liu's *Critical Translation Theory* exemplifies this perspective, revealing translation as a site where cultural symptoms manifest and power relations are constructed and contested.

Beyond Liu, Bassnett and Lefevere's cultural turn similarly reframed translation as rewriting governed by patronage, ideology, and institutional contexts. Lawrence Venuti critiqued the political economy of translation, exposing how market forces and cultural hegemonies render translators invisible and shape translation flows. Michael Cronin's work on globalization further demonstrates how technological and economic systems materially affect translation practices.

Thus, Translation Materialism urges scholars to move beyond text-focused analysis, instead investigating translation as a historically situated practice embedded in broader social structures. This approach expands translation studies to interrogate how translation reproduces or resists dominant ideologies, highlighting its role within systems of power and knowledge production.

5.3. Re-examining the Basic Questions of Translation

In discussing modernity, Liu redefines mistranslation. Traditional translation history often evaluates translation based on faithfulness vs. mistranslation. However, Liu rejects this binary, arguing instead that "mistranslation" is a key source of translational creativity. Also, mistranslation is not merely an error but a mechanism for generating new meaning. This perspective is crucial for understanding how translation reshapes concepts within target cultures. For example: when the English term "democracy" was translated into "民权" (mín quán, "people's rights") in late Qing China, it misrepresented Western democratic theory. However, this "mistranslation" became a revolutionary slogan that profoundly influenced Chinese political movements.

CTS has brought to light and critically analysed the presence of "foreign terms" embedded within historical processes. Following the Opium War, international law was translated into Chinese under the influence of missionaries, thereby laying the groundwork for a rudimentary Western political discourse within the Qing imperial court—one that would come to be widely accepted. Although The Law of Nations was introduced belatedly, it nonetheless became the legal pretext for Western military aggression against China, contributing to the illusion of a "global law" or "universal order." In modern Chinese, many conceptual terms were introduced or coined through translation, yet their continued use has desensitised users to their foreign origins, leading to the assumption that such terms are inherently domestic. CTS challenges this naturalisation by critically interrogating the sources and ideological functions of these terms that appear to carry modern legitimacy yet have obscure or problematic origins. Such exemplary case studies in CTS expose how translation facilitated Asia's coerced internalisation of Western moral and linguistic regimes, thereby revealing the entangled relationship between history and contemporary power structures. These studies lay bare the ideological duplicity of colonialism, often concealed beneath the surface of translated discourse. In short, the CTS scholarship led by Lydia H. Liu is, as she and Yang Lihua assert, "Liu's *Critical Translation Theory* is part of the broader project of 'reading the empire.'". [13]

6. Conclusion

Re-examining the historical dimensions of translation allows for a deeper investigation into how translational activity shapes the mechanisms of historical narration. History is not a static or closed textual structure; rather, it is a dynamic process continually subjected to deconstruction and reconstruction through translation. Within the context of globalisation, this interplay becomes particularly pronounced—when marginalised historical archives and cultural memories are brought into dominant discursive spaces via cross-linguistic mediation, the translator assumes a role beyond that of lin-

guistic converter, functioning instead as an ideological negotiator and an agent that reveals underlying power relations.

Lydia H. Liu's retracing of translational practices reflects a twofold transformation in contemporary translation historiography. At the methodological level, her work exemplifies a form of "translation archaeology," in which the transmission and mutation of texts are tracked to challenge the constructed continuity of linear historical narratives. At the level of value orientation, emphasis is placed on the translator's agency. During transitional periods in Chinese history and culture, those who introduced Western knowledge and conceptual systems through translation functioned not merely as intermediaries, but as creative agents in intercultural dialogue. This theoretical repositioning not only redefines the disciplinary locus of translation studies, but also offers new methodological insights for historiography. The reconstruction of historical truth is shown to be a consensual formation shaped through polyphonic acts of translation. Liu's critical translation theory thus provides a conceptual and analytical "toolkit" for translation historians, while articulating a fundamental proposition: translation history is, in essence, a history of contested meaning. Researchers are required to read with investigative precision-detecting latent structures of power embedded within linguistic shifts, conceptual transformations, and textual silences. However, it must also be noted that CTS faces significant archival challenges. Gaps in historical records, particularly the absence of marginalized translators' voices, pose limitations for reconstructing the full dynamics of translation history. CTS navigates these gaps by treating silences and omissions not merely as absences but as critical data, reading what is unrecorded alongside what is preserved. This approach enables scholars to critique the power relations embedded in archival production itself and to recover partial, fragmented, yet meaningful histories of translation. This research orientation contributes not only to the expansion of translation historiography and the reevaluation of translation's relation to historical processes, but also to a critical reflection on contemporary practice: what forms of hegemony are being produced by present-day translation?

Abbreviations

CTS Critical Translation Studies

Author Contributions

Zhao Weijia is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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