

INTERVIEW

Vol.1.Issue.3.,2014

LITERARY TRANSLATION, GENDER AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY ——INTERVIEWING  
WITH LUISE VON FLOTOW

LI PING

Qufu Normal University, Rizhao, Shandong, China, 276826; Beijing Foreign  
Studies University, Beijing, China, 100089



LI PING

Article Received : 30/08/2014

Article Revised:06/10/2014

Article Accepted:08/10/2014

During Prof. Luise Von Flotow's stay in Nankai University, Beijing Foreign Studies University and Tsinghua University in March 10-28, 2013, I had an interview with her. The following text contains some of the questions and answers concerning the gender in translation studies, cultural diplomacy and translation studies, her views on the latest developments in translation studies and practice. Furthermore, she gives some suggestions on China Going Global and the Project of Translating Classical Chinese Texts of Philosophy and Knowledge and Metaphysics into many other languages.

©COPY RIGHT 'KY PUBLICATIONS'

(L: Li Ping; F: Luise Von Flotow)

1. L: Professor Luise Von Flotow, welcome to Beijing Foreign Studies University and thank you for giving me the privilege to conduct this interview with you. As we all know, you are one of the representatives of feminist translation studies. What motivated you to carry out feminist translation studies in the very beginning?

F: I got interested in feminist translation studies before there was such a thing. And the reason why I got interested in feminist translation was because feminist writing was very important in the 1970s and early 1980s, when I was finishing university, and when I was busy with children, and when I began my work for an MA. Feminist writing was really the most important activity, new and interesting activity, going on in literature, contemporary literature. And so I was very interested in feminist writing. And then, because I was studying French, I became even more interested in feminist writing in French and especially because I was in Canada, in feminist writing from Quebec, which is the French speaking part of Canada. And after a little while, some of the French feminist writing from Quebec started to be translated into English. That was when I began my PhD studies, and became aware of this work, in 1985. I decided then to focus on it and to write about it and to

study it and to see what were the activities of, especially, the feminist translators of the feminist writing. That's the very beginning of it.

2. **L:** You put forward some feminist translation strategies for rewriting the original text, such as supplementing, prefacing and footnoting and hijacking. Since you're a translator, do you practice these strategies in your own translation practice?

**F:** I described these strategies from an academic, analytic point of view. That doesn't mean that I use them myself when I am a translator. You don't always do the same thing, if you are looking at something academically as if you are doing it yourself. However, I do use prefacing and footnoting in my own translations, depending on what it is that I am translating. I don't think I could say that I have ever used hijacking or supplementing perhaps, yes, a little bit but not very much. Mainly it is prefacing and footnoting. And I find that I don't have to use a lot of these interventionist activities of feminist translators, because I only translate books that I like. I only translate texts that I approve of and I only translate women. I am not saying that I approve of everything all women write, but I choose the texts that I translate, and so I don't have to do a lot of political manipulation with the texts that I translate.

3. **L:** In the preface of your second book on gender and translation. *Translating Women*, you say, "it's time to expand the first paradigm (No: this paradigm is the feminist paradigm of gender studies as applied to translation. And then you put forward a second paradigm. (Yes, this is the gender/performance paradigm). Would you please interpret these two paradigms as applied to translation and what role do women translators play in these two paradigms respectively?

**F:** Yes this terminology, the first paradigm and the second paradigm are terms that I made up in another text on translating gender. And it has to do with the first paradigm referring to feminism. The second paradigm referring to a much looser and broader terminology that has to do with gender and then with performance of gender. Feminism is much easier to apply to translation. Feminist ideas are much easier to apply to translation, and to use when you are criticizing a translation or when you are doing research on translations and trying to describe a translation. Then you can describe from a feminist point of view. So that would be the first paradigm.

With regard to the second paradigm, when you are describing a translation or analyzing a translation or analyzing the activities of a translator from the point of view of performance and performing gender it's much more difficult. At least I have found it more difficult. And so, when I say here that it is time to expand on the first paradigm and then to also work on the second paradigm, it is this second paradigm that I think could use more expansion: it seems logical that when you talk about gender as a performance, that that idea of performance should also be applicable to translation. Translation is also always a performance of a text, and a second translation of that same text is a second and a different performance. And a third translation is a third and different performance again. I would like to see someone write about the connection between gender as a performance and translation as a performance. That's what I am talking about here. And I don't think that this has been done yet.

About the second part of that question, what role do women translators play in these two paradigms respectively. It's very hard to say that women translators all play the same kind of role. Not all women are feminists, not all women translators are feminist translators. It might make more sense here to say what role do feminist translators play in these two paradigms. I think a feminist translator would or could play a large and important role at least in the first paradigm, because she would be dealing with a text from her feminist perspective and would be interfering and intervening and doing things with that text in translation from her personal political perspective. Whether a feminist translator could also work from the broader gender as performance perspective, I don't know. I think it would be very interesting to work on the notion of gender as a performance and then translation as a performance. And I don't think you would necessarily need to be feminist to do so.

4. **L:** You want to draw people's attention to women studies in translation by publishing *Translating Women*. Is this because you think feminist translation research has declined? Why has feminist translation research declined?

**F:** Yes I think that feminist translation research or a feminist perspective on translation research has declined. From the 1990sonward. And I think one of the big reasons is that the term gender became much more prevalent. And the theoretical interests changed from very politicized ones, the feminist approaches, which were maybe too politicized and too black and white, to something that was much less focused on politics, and more interested in behavior, in individuals and individual aspects of gender. The interest in gender became the interest in how a person's sexuality, is "performed." Questions about sexual performances became more important than more political questions about feminism. And this had an effect on translation studies and on the way one could address questions, such questions, in translation and in translation studies. Questions became much more individualistic, in a way. And also, the language of bisexuality or transsexuals is not always easy to pin down in a text and to write about. How can you find a bisexual word in a text that then can be checked in its translated form. It's very difficult. I think the problem is that some of this interest in and focus on gender isn't necessarily visible in language. Whereas earlier, the feminist focus on language could find clear things to say and problematize these gender and sexual "performance" questions are not always reflected in language, they are reflected in other types of performance. There has been work on gay translation and the translation of certain gay terminology and gay language, but not very much. One book, a couple of articles, nothing more. There has been little on lesbian writing, because lesbian writing has often been included in women's writing. It has just been harder to pin down gender performance in language and therefore also in translation.

5. **L:** In your lecture, you mentioned that, Elizabeth Lewis wrote in "In Other Words": "The time has come to query translation." In your opinion, is there a bright future for queer in translation studies?

**F:** In my opinion there is not a bright future for queer in translation studies. There are probably several reasons, but the main one seems to be that queer tries to avoid categorization and labeling. Yet, whenever you try to study a phenomenon, a textual phenomenon then you have to, or you almost inevitably have to group examples together. Certain nouns or verbs are translated in a certain way, or there is always the same type of adjective, that's used. All the time you are grouping, and you are categorizing and you are labeling. So, if queer as a theory rejects labels, rejects categories and rejects groupings and wants to somehow neutralize things then I don't know how you can study textual phenomena, except individually, one by one.. So, no, I don't think that there is a bright future for queer in translation.

6. **L:** Based on careful reading of your articles and books, we found that from 2007, you had moved your research interest to "literary translation and cultural diplomacy". Does your changing of research interest show there is relative lull in activity around gender in translation studies? Or does it mean that you still pursue your research on gender in translation studies even in "literary translation and cultural diplomacy"?

**F:** There are a few reasons for this change: first of all, it is smart to broaden one's research focus. I cannot work on the same things all the time - but it is true the problems I have described - and the theoretical turn from feminism to gender to queer certainly hampered my activities in that area. I had NOTHING to say about questions like sexual orientation. And yes, there was a certain lull in research activity in feminist /gender approaches to translation research. It was time to take a break and do something else for awhile, and focus on Canadian women writers in Germany in the process.

7. **L:** Ok, thank you. Besides studying women in translation studies you also researched translation in cultural diplomacy. In your opinion, what is the relation between the translation of literature and cultural diplomacy?

**F:** I think there is quite an important relationship between the translation of literature and cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy is a methodology nations and national governments, and even local governments use to make themselves interesting. And to make themselves attractive and to influence other countries and other nations and other cultures by attracting attention, and by being seductive. One way that cultural diplomacy seeks to do this - to influence other nations and make a certain place look attractive - is by exporting its culture, i.e. translating literary texts. One way. There are other ways, but the translation of literature is something that is widespread as a method to let other cultures know about yourself. This has been the case over the last 150 years approximately when the first institutions for cultural diplomacy were set up. Today there are many different cultural diplomacy organizations, including the Confucian Colleges set up by China, which explain and teach and disseminate Chinese culture in other countries. I know that in the case of China there is a big project at the moment to translate classical Chinese texts of philosophy and knowledge and metaphysics into many other languages: this is a wonderful example of cultural diplomacy in action.

**8. L:** Ok. Now, what role do women translators play in cultural diplomacy?

**F:** Women translators? They play the same role as male translators!. and that role is to help in the export of national literature of some kind, of national writers or national playwrights or national poets into other languages. And I don't think there will necessarily be much feminist influence here, because very often the books that are chosen for the purposes of cultural diplomacy are not feminist books. They are more often mainstream literature, not usually critical literature; literature that the government can approve of and that the government selects. So women translators play the role simply of mediators, of making that available for the other culture.

**9. L:** Metaphors are often used in translation studies to illustrate some translation theory. You also use a metaphor "Translation is the vehicle" in your recent research project, "Translating Canada", to illustrate the role of translation in cultural diplomacy; please explain it.

**F:** Translation is a major force for dissemination. It is largely unrecognized by foreign affairs diplomats and yet it is highly effective in creating (and perhaps changing) images. This has been shown in studies of Translation and Post-colonialism, for instance in *Siting Translation* (Niranjana 1992), in *subaltern studies*, in *Translation and Imperialism* (Robinson 2000). In all, texts need to move in cultural diplomacy. What makes them move, what makes it possible for them to move is translation. Nothing else can get a Chinese text into English or French Canada, for example. So, translation is the vehicle. In regard to both of the "Translating Canada" projects, my focus is on translation as the activity that moves texts from Canada into other parts of the world. So, here too, translation is the vehicle.

**10. L:** As to your book *Translating Canada. The Institutions and Influences of Cultural Transfer. Canadian Writing in Germany*, which were the most interesting results from the research?

**F:** That book came out in 2007, and the most interesting results again had to do with women writers. The period I studied was 1967 to 2000. 1967 because that was the year that Canada became a hundred years old, an important year for promoting Canadian culture and promoting the production of Canadian culture. The most interesting results in this project was that Canadian women writers were the ones who were most translated into German. This happened in the 1980s and 1990s, when about almost twice as many women were translated as men writers. In both decades. Probably the most important reason was that feminism had had a strong strong influence in Europe, and created a huge interest in women writers. The second reason is Germans generally are avid readers, and German women especially. These women readers were looking for feminist writers, or women writers, to read. And the German publishing houses, who had created series of "women writers" needed to find works to put in their series for all these reader out there to read. And so there was a huge turnover and a huge development of translation of women authors at this point in German, and of course, Canadian authors benefited.

11. L: In your "Translating Canada" project, would you introduce your research methodology in the part "how are translations received? Effects?", taking "women writers" as an example?

F: The research methodology starts with the construction of the database. Then, various questions can be asked of the database, various statistics can be compiled, and quantitative analyses can be done: how many women writers have been translated into Spanish/into Portuguese? How many have been translated in Argentina, Uruguay, Spain? or in Brazil vs Portugal? Then from these quantitative results other qualitative research can begin: we know that most well-known women writers are translated in Spain by large, rich publishing houses. Why? What happens to their work? Does it go to Latin America? How? How effectively? etc. There are many other kinds of questions of course: are women poets translated? If so, where? How do these (much less popular) works find translators? readers? Is there any collaboration with target culture poets? Same questions for playwrights: how does that exchange work? and what are its effects.

12. L: Do you think that translation as a part of Canada's cultural diplomacy in Latin America is successful and in what way do you think the other countries, including China, can learn from this?

F: Yes, this is a reference to my current research project, which has to do with Canada and the translation of Canadian material into Latin America. And do I think it is successful? No, I don't think it is very successful. One of the main reasons is that Canadian texts, the strongest and the best known materials are not translated in Latin America but in Spain. And then, if this work is successful in Spain if there are enough Spanish readers, then the Spanish publishing house may create another publication, for distribution in Latin America. In other words, Canadian material is controlled in Spain and doesn't necessarily even go to Latin America. When it does go to Latin America, it goes in a form of Spanish that Latin Americans don't appreciate and don't enjoy reading. So there are quite a few difficulties in distributing Canadian texts in Latin America: the most international Canadian writers either do not make it to Latin America or are not considered interesting because they arrive in "peninsular Spanish." What does go to Latin America directly from Canada is poetry and drama. And is that very important? I don't think so. I don't think that Canada's cultural diplomacy has been very successful in this area. It has helped a little to promote anthologies of Canadian writings, short little collections of Canadian short stories, and poetry But not the successful international materials that go to Spain first.

What way do I think that other countries could learn from this? Good question. I think that if China or other countries wanted to distribute work in Latin America they have to keep in mind that the Spanish publishing industry is very strong and has its own agenda, which may not include dissemination in Latin America. More generally, though, I think that cultural diplomacy can work, not necessarily with simply subsidies to promote publishing or a little support to help with translation. I think that promoting academic activities is the best option: bringing academics into the country, for instance foreign academics to come to China to study Chinese or study Chinese writing or study Chinese history. And then have those academics go home to their countries, to Japan or to Latin America or to Canada and teach students about China. This, I think, is probably one of the most effective ways to promote cultural diplomacy, because not only are academics coming to learn but they have to go home afterward and teach 30 or 40 students what they have learned. Thereby they multiply their interests and pass them on to the younger generation who later on will be the readers and the decision makers and the more important people in society. This is what I saw in the German project where German academics had played a major role in bringing the Canadian material into Germany.

L: Thank you!

Notes :

1. Luise von Flotow's lecture on "Translating Women" in Tsinghua University on March 17, 2013.
2. Luise von Flotow lecture on "Literary Translation and Cultural or Public Diplomacy" in Nankai University and Beijing Foreign Studies University on March 15, and March 16, 2013 respectively.

References

- [1]. Niranjana, Tejaswini. *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial Context*. California: University of California Press, 1992.

- 
- [2]. Robinson, Douglas. *Translation and empire: postcolonial theories explained*. Manchester : St. Jerome Publishing, 1997.
- [3]. von Flotow, Luise. *Translation and Gender—Translating in the ‘Era of Feminism’*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing and Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1997.
- [4]. \_\_\_\_\_. “Soft Diplomacy, Nation Branding, and Translation: Telling Canada’s “Story” Globally” (with Brita Oeding, PhD candidate) in *Translation. Reflections, Refractions, Transformations*. eds. Paul St-Pierre and Prafulla C. Kar, Pencroft International, New Delhi, 2004, 173-193.
- [5]. \_\_\_\_\_. “Translation and Gender Paradigms: From Identities to Pluralities”, *The Companion to Translation Studies*, eds. Piotr Kuhlczak and Karin Littau, Multilingual Matters, London, UK, 2007a, 92-107.
- [6]. \_\_\_\_\_. “Translating ‘High’ Literature for Public Diplomacy,” in *Viajes, identidades, imperios. Imaginarios ingleses en cultura, literatura y traducción*. Miguel Angel Montezanti (editor). Tomo I. La Plata: Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 2007b, 77-94.
- [7]. \_\_\_\_\_. “Revealing the ‘Soul of Which Nation?’” *Cultural Diplomacy and Literary Translation*,” in *Translation. Reflections, Refractions, Transformations*. ed. Paul St. Pierre, Benjamins, Amsterdam, 2007c, 187-201.
- [8]. \_\_\_\_\_. “Thirty Odd Years of Canadian Writing in German: Trends in Institutionalization, Translation, and Reception, 1967-2000”, *Traduire depuis les marges/Translating from the Margins*, Éditions Nota bene, Québec, 2008, 313-339.
- [9]. \_\_\_\_\_. “Thirty Years of Canadian Writing in German: Trends in Institutionalization, Translation and reception: 1967-2000,” in *Canadian Studies: The State of the Art/Erudes canadiennes: Questions de recherché*, eds. Klaus Dieter Ertler, Stewart Gill, Susan Hodgett, Patrick James, Frankfurt, Berlin, Vienna: Peter Lang, 2011b, 465-482.
- [10]. Von Flotow, Luise and Reingard Nischik. eds. *Translating Canada: The Institutions and Influences of Cultural Transfer*. Canadian Writing in Germany. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2007d.
- [11]. Von Flotow, Luise. ed. *Translating Women*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2011a.
-