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On Cultural Differences in Literary Translation

Zhao Hongmei*
TIANFU COLLEGE OF SWUFE, City of Mianyang, Sichuan Province, China
***Corresponding author, E-mail: 449707171@qq.com.**

Abstract:
Literary translation is a cross-cultural communication in the first place. Yet, a variety of problems arise from cultural differences in literary translation. The present paper will focus on the two major strategies: domesticating & foreignizing; and the concomitant methods free translation & literal translation for dealing with cultural problems in literary translation. Each strategy has its own merits and demerits which will be discussed respectively on the basis of the contrastive analysis of the two versions of Hongloumeng (《红楼梦》 in the hope of a balance being stricken between them when we put them into practice.

Key Words:
Culture; Domesticating; Foreignizing; Free Translation; Literal Translation

1 Introduction

Translation is first of all regarded as a cross-cultural interlingual communicative activity and, naturally enough there is no exception with literary translation, “an original subjective activity at the centre of a complex network of social and cultural practices”. (Mona Baker, 2004:127). During the process of such an activity, culture plays a crucial role in the transfer of meanings from one language to another continually. As a result, for the time being the word ‘culture’ and translation are increasingly linked since the advocate of ‘cultural turn ’put forward by Susan Basnett and André Lefevere in their collaborative work Translating, History and Culture in the 1990s. To put it simply, the intimate linkage between culture and translation has become the priority any translator may take into careful consideration. Accordingly the traditional role of the translator has been replaced by a new term ‘cultural mediator’, put forward first by Bochner(1981) (David Katan, 2004:Introduction). Literary translation, however, due to various artistic features of literary works and different cultures and literary traditions of the source text and target text, gives rise to various problems and for the most part is a universally difficult task to fulfill. Arduous though it is, numerous predecessors in this field managed to find out corresponding strategies and methods to deal with these problems and to great extent turned out effective. Given various difficulties stemming from cultural differences in translating literary works, the present paper makes a tentative effort to analyze the two major strategies, that is, domesticating, foreignizing, and offer a discussion on their merits and demerits when applied to the cultural problems respectively. Analyses and discussions are based on the comparative study of the two versions of *Hongloumeng*(《红楼梦》) translated by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang and David Hawkes respectively.

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2 Culture and Language

In the first place some notions about culture and the interaction between language and culture should be clarified so as to further aid to understanding the main concern of this paper.

Culture, an issue which preoccupied the attentions of many sociologists and anthropologists, has been given more than five hundred definitions. Here is one of the oldest and most quoted definitions made by the English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor in 1871: "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."(David Katan, 2004:16). In short, culture refers to the entire way of life in a given society, the behavior pattern of a people. In dealing with the cultural differences in translation, according to E. A. Nida, culture can be categorized as follows: (1) Ecology; (2) Material Culture: (a) Food (b) Clothes (c) Houses and Towns (d) Transport (3) Social Culture—work and leisure; (4) Religious Culture; (5) Linguistic Culture. It comes quite naturally that language is an integral part of culture and plays the role as the carrier of culture in the long history of human society. Some sociologists even consider language the keystone of culture. Without language, they maintain that culture would not be possible. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture; it reflects culture. In the broadest sense, language is the symbolic representation of a people, and it comprises its historical and cultural backgrounds as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking. Language interacts with culture and the understanding of one requires understanding of the other. Cultures differ from one another and each culture is unique and diverse and so are languages. The example of more than twenty words denoting snow in Eskimo culture is a case in point. To use them in the right place and at the right time requires a better understanding of that culture. Similarly, in Arabic countries, there is said to be nearly one hundred words for camels by virtue of the intimate relationship between this animal and the daily life of the people there. In this point, to those translators, any attempt to find out their cultural equivalents in most, if not all, other target languages is doomed to be a frustrating experience, even though they might be fully aware of the possible problems stemming from cultural differences among languages. No wander that some insightful scholars point out that to be a competent translator requires bilingualism as well as biculturalism.

The main concern occupying the following parts of the paper will be the various problems arising from cultural differences in literary translation and corresponding strategies for dealing with them.

3 Contrastive Analysis on Examples from *Hongloumeng*

As is known to all, Chinese is a Sino-Tibetan language while English is an Indo-European language. Each is characterized by its own unique features and reflects the mode of thinking of a people in a given culture. Those cultural-specific concepts and heavily cultural-loaded images can illustrate this point. In the novel *A Dream in Red Mansions*, the clothing, utensils, houses and décor, etc. are characterized by very strong features of Chinese culture and no ready equivalents can be found to match them in other languages. A green hand in literary translation might hesitate to take up such a demanding task if he is not well prepared for translating such a demanding literary work. Yet the translators, well educated in the target language and culture offered two English versions of this famous novel: one is translated by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang

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with an English name *A Dream in Red Mansions* in 1978, the other by the British sinologists David Hawkes and his son-in-law John Minford in five volumes by the name of The Story of the Stone in 1973. The two versions have been enjoying a worldwide popularity up to now. In dealing with sophisticated cultural elements in this great work, they manifested quite different tendencies towards the choice of strategies and methods to tackle those serious translation problems of the source language text as a result of their different educational and cultural background, different translation purposes and the intended readership of the target-language text. For example:

1)…… " 癞蛤蟆想吃天鹅肉 ……"。

Version A: A toad hankering for a taste of a swan (By Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang)

Version B: A case of "the toad on the ground wanting to eat the goose in the sky" (By David Hawkes)

[NB: all versions A by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang ; all versions B by David Hawkes and John Minford in the following parts]

Obviously, version A is the result of literal translation either at grammatical level or in terms of the transfer of the image— 天鹅 (swan) in the target language whereas version B changed the image of 天鹅 into one kind of domestic fowl: goose for the reason that the images of goose and swan have different associative meanings in the receptors' culture, and we can get some glimpse of that in the English idiom 'a swan among geese'. This is unquestionably on the part of David Hawkes the result of the careful consideration of the possible impact cultural differences might have on the target culture readership.

2) 至于才子佳人等书，…… 更有一种风月笔墨 ……

Version A: As for books of the beauty-and–talented-type… Even worse are those writers of the breeze-and-moonlight school…

Version B: And the "boudoir romances"… Still worse is the "erotic novel" …

Version A sounds very odd, unnatural and even confusing to the readers from English-speaking countries for the reason that the word-for-word translation of 才子佳人 and 风月笔墨 into 'beauty-and-talented' and 'the breeze-and-moonlight school' is absolutely foreign to them.

Version B deleted the images with cultural deposit of the source language and conveyed the massage into the target language. In terms of the acceptability in the receiving culture, version B is a cut above version A.

3) 心较比干多一窍，病如西子胜三分。

Version A: She looked more sensitive than Pikan① , more delicate than His Shih②

① A prince noted for his great intelligence at the end of the Shang Dynasty.

② A famous beauty of the ancient Kingdom of Yueh.

Version B: She had more chambers in her heart than the martyred Bi Gan; And suffered a tithe more pain in it than the beautiful Xi Shi.

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For the same reason, Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang managed to convey the massage as well as retain the cultural meanings of the two historical figures quite familiar to the Chinese readers and as a result they succeeded to fulfill the task of cross-cultural communication to a fairly great extent. To put it another way, version A was rendered literally and was offered an annotation to briefly explain the cultural phenomena in order to further facilitate the general comprehension on the part of the readers in English-speaking countries While enjoying the story, they are likely to come closer to the Chinese culture. This may be part of Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang's translation purposes. Compared with version A, version B is far from being satisfactory because of loss of the cultural meanings of 比干 and 西施 , focal to the understanding of the protagonist's character and quality: peerless intelligence and delicate beauty, though David Hawks put two modifiers 'martyred 'and 'beautiful' before Bi Gan and Xi Shi, an attempt to further explain them, but to no avail ,given that such words as 'chamber in her heart' sounds strange. As we know, human intelligence is usually associated with 心 (heart) in Chinese culture while it is associated with mind in most English-speaking countries. It is hard to imagine how the intended target language readers might respond to such an odd expression. Apart from the fact that the translators are from different educational and cultural background, the reasons on the surface why there are different versions of the same source language text can be attributed to the different strategies and concomitant methods they adopted to deal with the cultural differences in translating such a great work with typical Chinese culture deposit. Part IV will be devoted to the detailed discussion of the major strategies, namely, domesticating and foreignizing, and the two methods, that is, free translation and literal translation.

4 Some Viewpoints on Domesticating and Foreignizing

The comparative analysis on the cases mentioned above illustrates that for the most part versions A are the immediate results of adoption of the strategy **foreignizing** and the method literal **translation** while versions B are reproduced by adopting the strategy **domesticating** and the method **free translation**. In the field of Chinese translation studies, it is generally acknowledged that the strategies can be found in Friedrich Schleiermacher's argument that 'there are only two. Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him. Or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him.'(Mona Baker, 2004:242). To put it simply, domesticating is a target language culture-oriented strategy. The purpose of adopting this strategy is to conform to values currently dominating the target language culture and accordingly lay much emphasis on the readership in the receiving culture. On the other hand, foreignizing is a source language culture-oriented strategy, aiming at retaining the features of the source language text as many as possible, and put much stress on cultural elements of the source language text.

In cases already discussed in part III, it is self-evident that versions B by David Hawks and John Minford differ in great measure from versions A by Yang in terms of linguistic as well as cultural features. By far the reason why differences arise comes to light: the two translators worked under the guidance of different strategies and methods. David Hawks as a sinologist has a very solid command of the Chinese language and culture. In dealing with such culture-specific terms as 才子佳人 and 风月笔墨 , he seems to have much more freedom in deleting the images by conveying massage to the target language readers while Yang Hsien-yi

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and Gladys Yang are devoid of such a right because in the eyes of any well-educated Chinese *Hongloumeng* enjoys a very high status in Chinese culture. Any literary translator is under an obligation to render it into the target language as faithfully as possible; and besides, Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang were commissioned to undertake the task by the government. That was a serious matter and there was no room for alteration or even deletion of some cultural images in the translated text. For them, sticking to the original text would be the priority of their consideration in choosing certain strategies and methods. In contrast, David Hawkes translated this work for the sake of academic study and he was immune to the influence from patronage.

The two strategies are the focus of the debate for scholars in translation studies. Domesticating is criticized for the failure to promote cultural exchange and the distortion and even betrayal to the source language text. This strategy is under criticism for the loss of the national characteristics of cultures as well. Some even maintain that this is one kind of deception to the target language readers, something called 'imperialistic domestication' (Venuti, 1992:13). What's worse, cultural disposition is very likely to occur in the case " 阿弥陀佛 ", which was rewritten into an idiomatic expression 'God bless my soul' by David Hawkes. " 阿弥陀佛 "(Amitabha in Sanskrit) was substituted with 'God', a term particularly popular with the readership with the Christian background. This practice might be misleading: the source language audience has the same religious belief as them.

As for the other strategy foreignizing is concerned, it aims at manifesting cultural elements of the source language text rather than erasing them in the translated text; it is a great blessing for the enrichment and development of a nation's language and culture and at the same time it may enable the target language readers to read something 'foreign' between line and thus evoke their interest in the source language culture. Doing so will contribute greatly to acculturation among different nations. Irrespective of such merits foreignizing has, there are still some complaints about the strange and stiff style of the translated text. The example of 才子佳人 and 风月笔墨 is a case in point. The average readers of the target language may have little knowledge about 才子佳人 and 风月笔墨 . Literally translated version without any explanation 'beauty-and-talented' and 'the breeze-and-moonlight school surely gave rise to confusions on the part of the general reading public in English-speaking countries. Fortunately, a commonly used way annotation can be used to compensate the weakness. 比干 and 西施 , for example, unknown to the TL readers, if translated literally, is an obstacle to their reading. Relatively smooth reading entails an annotation explaining the cultural information of the names unfamiliar to the target language readership.

Of course, we should by no means hold a one-man's-meat-is-another-man's

-poison attitude towards the two strategies and methods. They should be happily combined to tackle various problems arising from cross-cultural communication. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang did not solely use foreignizing strategy and literal translation, nor did David Hawkes. In translating some measurement units in *Hongloumeng*, say, 钱 (qian) in a prescription cannot be matched with any measurement unit in English-speaking countries. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang rendered 钱 (qian) into OZ; 深有万丈，遥亘千里 was translated as a hundred thousand feet deep and a thousand li. 钱 (qian)and 丈 (zhang) were substituted with the British measurement units: OZ and foot respectively. As a matter of fact, they are not the same in magnitude. Similarly, 二三十里 was expressed as miles away in English. On the other hand, David Hawkes naturalized 比干 and 西施 into English: Bi Gan and Xi Shi and put two modifiers martyred and beautiful be-

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fore them with an expectation that readers in his culture might accept them as a new elements in the development of their culture.

5 Conclusion

Literary translation is a very difficult job given that too many factors are involved. The present paper takes the cultural differences in literary translation as a focus of discussion by virtue of the intimate linkage between translation and culture. In confrontation with a variety of problems in literary translation, the predecessors in this field have offered us many examples to follow. From their practices, two major strategies, that is, domesticating and foreignizing, are adopted to deal with the problems stemming from cultural differences. Yet, the two strategies have their own merits and demerits. Domesticating, as a target language culture-oriented strategy, contributes a lot to the readability and acceptability of the source language texts in the receptor culture while it is prone to erase a nation's cultural characteristics and to some extent it is said to be a kind of deception on the part of TL readership. Foreignizing, a source language culture-oriented strategy, on one hand is justified in retaining the local cultural color and promoting cultural exchange between different nations and enriching the target language and culture. On the other hand, the stiff, unnatural and awkward style of translated texts more or less hinders the smooth reading of the text, let alone appreciation of them. Furthermore, it is very likely that some confusion concerning cultural factors might occur. As a professional literary translator, apart from being bicultural and bilingual, he must bear in mind that each strategy has its merits and demerits and that the two should complemented each other instead of adoption of one claiming the denial of the other.

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