

Approaching Cultural Faithfulness: A Study Based on the Translation of *A Dream of Red Mansions*

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Abstract

Faithfulness is the fundamental standard of translation. People have different opinions on faithfulness. This study, taking the translation of the Chinese classic *A Dream of Red Mansions* as an example, investigates the translation of cultural information and proposes that cultural faithfulness is of great importance for cultural communication in literary translation. The translator should use appropriate strategies and methods to convert the cultural information in the target text. To be faithful to the source culture, the translator should be familiar with the political, historical and cultural background of the original text to avoid over-domestication, over-foreignization, zero translation and mistranslation and use zero compensation, compensation in the version, compensation by annotations and compensation by transformation to compensate for the cultural default in specific translations.

Keywords: Cultural translation, Faithfulness, Cultural loss, Cultural compensation

1. Introduction

As a core concept in the traditional translation theories, faithfulness has been being discussed by translators, translation theorists and philosophers throughout the history of translation. Faithfulness is the first and foremost thing in translation. Despite the different interpretations, it is commonly accepted that the translation should be faithful to the original. The original may refer to the author, the original language, the target language, or even the target readers. However, emphasizing on any one of these aspects will lead to what Venuti (1995) called narcissism or even ethnocentrism, racism, hegemonism and imperialism. What we suggest is that the translator should be faithful to the source language culture. Culture should be respected and preserved; it cannot be changed or ignored. It can be said that to translate is to convey the cultural images.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the faithfulness in the process of translation. For this purpose, we take the two versions of translation of *A Dream of Red Mansions* as examples, to discuss cultural translation from the perspectives of cultural loss, cultural compensation and the relativity of cultural faithfulness.

2. Culture and Cultural Study

Culture is a large and invasive concept. It is difficult to give a popularly accepted definition. According to Taylor (1871), culture is a complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morality, laws, habits and capabilities acquired by man as social members. Since the last century, cultural study has aroused the interest of Chinese scholars. A large number of foreign cultural works were translated into Chinese. At the same time, a large number of works on cultural studies were published in China. An area of cultural study is cultural default and cultural compensation, meaning “the absence of relevant cultural background knowledge shared by the author and his or her intended readers” (Guo, 2000, p. 234). For conciseness and efficiency, the author may omit some cultural information which he thinks his readers are familiar with. In translation, the translator should know what is omitted and what should be compensated for.

In cultural translation, the translator should adopt relevant strategies. The two strategies, i.e., domestication and foreignization, were first proposed by Schleiermacher (1813), the former being author-centered, and the latter, reader-centered. Although the definition of foreignization has surpassed the language level and gone up to the level of culture, poetics and politics, the culture and poetics are still loaded in the culture of language form (Wang, 2002, p. 25-26). Therefore, the study of foreignization in China is still at the level of language. In west countries, however, foreignization has been put in the context of post-colonialism since the very beginning. Its spearhead was directed at ethnocentrism, racism, hegemonism and imperialism.

According to Venuti (1995), using a variety of standard target language forms in translation is the key strategy of foreignization, including archaism, jargons, technical terminologies, regional and social dialects and new words with style characters. Foreignization is not necessarily relevant to the fluency of the translated text. This does not mean at all that the texts translated with foreignization should not be fluent. In fact, even some supporters of

foreignization seek for the fluency of translated text in their translation (Sun, 2002, p. 44).

3. Translations of *A Dream of Red Mansions*

In almost 200 years, the novel has nine different English versions, eight of which are translated by westerners or overseas Chinese translators. The full versions translated by Yang & Yang (1994) and Hawkes (1979) are big events of the Chinese literature and an important milestone in the history of the world cultural exchange. They were regarded as classics of the world literature. Yang & Yang (1994) use the literal translation method under the guidance of the strategy of foreignization and try to introduce Chinese culture to the West by using footnotes to make cultural compensation and explain the Chinese characters and the Chinese-culture-loaded words in the novel.

Hawkes (1979) uses free translation method under the guidance of the strategy of domestication which makes his translation in line with the reading habits of the Western readers and quite influential among the Anglo-Americans. So he wipes out as much as possible the differences between the two cultures in his translation.

3.1 Cultural Translation

A Dream of Red Mansions is considered as an encyclopedia of Chinese traditional culture. There are more than 960 character names, over 260 poems and lyrics, 204 allusions, 52 two-part sayings, religious rituals, festivals and solar terms, geographic places, official names, laws and institutions, dramas, games, music, art, food culture (186 kinds of food), landscape art, architecture, religion, tea culture, Chinese medicine (25 Chinese patent medicine), costume, color and sex, etc. The study on the cultural factors in *A Dream of Red Mansions* is at a macro level such as limitations of translatability in cultural translation, cultural translation strategies and constraints, views on domestication and foreignization, skopos theory and differences in cultural awareness. Here are some examples:

(1) Religion and over-domestication

Example: 世上只有神仙好，惟有功名忘不了。(Chapter 1)

Yang & Yang: All men long to be immortals, yet to riches and rank each aspires.

Hawkes: Men all know that salvation should be won. But with ambition won't have done, have done.

This is the beginning of a song which is called *All Good Things Must End* created by the author to warn common people by the character of the lamed Taoist. Hawkes translates “神仙” into “salvation” which is a concept of western Christian ideas, referring to the Saints emancipated from the “sins” and to be saved from their “sins” is the goal perseveringly pursued by Christians. It is the highest realm of thought Christians seek for. “Immortal” is a concept of Taoism whose highest realm of thought is to practice Taoism to be immortals.

In Hawkes' version, the western readers who would think that most Chinese people also believe in Christian but in fact most of us believe in Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism.

(2) Food culture: missing translation and misunderstanding

Example: 腊八粥 (Chapter 19)

Yang & Yang: “sweet gruel”

Hawkes: “frumenty”

Both of the translators simplified the translation from which the target readers don't know the exact ingredients in the porridge and why it is called “腊八粥”. In fact it is made on the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month and it is made of yellow rice, white rice, glutinous rice, millet, water chestnuts, chestnuts, red beans, peeled date pastes and so on with red peach, almond, melon seeds, peanuts, pine nuts, hazelnuts, white sugar, brown sugar, grapes to decorate it. Yang & Yang translated “腊八” into “sweet gruel” which means sweet porridge and Hawkes translated it into “frumenty” which means “sweet milk and cereal porridge or sweet milk paste”.

(3) Allusions and thick translation

In Chapter 58, on his way to see Daiyu, Baoyu saw a big apricot tree behind an artificial hill that was already bare of flowers and covered with thick foliage. The apricots on the tree were no bigger than peas. 宝玉因想道：“能病了几天，竟把杏花辜负了！不觉倒‘绿叶成荫子满枝’了！” Hawkes used a large segment of words to make an annotation for the allusion: ‘What a shame!’ he thought. ‘Just those few days in bed and I missed the apricot blossom.’ And in among the green leaves now. The young fruit hangs from every bough.’ He stood and gazed at the tree. They were Du Mu’s lines, written on his last visit to Hu-zhou, when he met with the beautiful young dancer of a dozen years before and found that she was now a married woman with a brood of children. How did it go? The spring-time blossoms, white and red, before the thieving wind have fled; And in among the green leaves now. The young fruit hangs from every bough. He thought of Xing Xiu-yan’s betrothal. It would only be a year or two now before she married... (Hawkes)

We cannot see the poet Du Mu in the original work. The line is taken from Du Mu’s “Sigh for Flowers”. The so-called “子满枝(covered with young fruit)” means there being many children. It is called thick translation, meaning translating everything in great detail and the interest of the readers being aroused, with the structure of the original novel being lost.

In Chapter 75, Jia Zhen, being in mourning and unable to go out to amuse himself or listen to dramas, tried to find a way to kill the time. In the day, with the excuse of practicing archery, he invited young dukes and other rich relatives and friends to archery contest. The young nobles from enjoyed cock-fighting, dog-racing and playing about with singsong girls and young actors. They agreed to take it in turn to stand treat every day after the archery contest.

“天天宰猪割羊，屠鹅戮鸭，好似‘临潼斗宝’的一般，都要卖弄自己家里的好厨役好烹宰。” (Chapter 75)

Hawkes: It became a point of honor to make these dinners as lavish as possible, so that the daily junketings at Ning-guo House came more and more to resemble the Diet of Lintong in

the well-known play of that name, except that whereas Duke Mu's princely guests competed in the bravery of their commanders and the magnificence of their regalia, it was in the skill of their chefs and in masterpieces of culinary art that the members of the Ning-guo archery club strove to outdo each other.

The segment is the annotation of the allusion “临潼斗宝” which was a drama played in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties and was written during the Spring and Autumn period. It was about Qinmu Gong who wanted to be a hegemonist and conspired with Baili Xi to force the seventeen states' dukes competing for treasures in Lintong, which was called “Sessions Competing for Treasures”. Wu Zixu from Chu demonstrated against it by holding a ding at the session, which scared Qinmu Gong. Thus the dukes were able to safely return. The allusion does not appear in historical records, but frequently appeared in dramas. The specific descriptions of “having pigs, sheep and poultry killed” were translated into “as lavish as possible” freely.

(4) Two-part sayings and omission

Example: 鸳鸯: 什么“好话! 宋徽宗的鹰, 赵子昂的马——都是好画儿! 什么“喜事”, 状元痘儿灌的浆——又满是喜事。(Chapter 46)

Yang & Yang: What's all this talk of 'good news' and 'good fortune'?

Hawkes: “Wonderful news” indeed!

“宋徽宗”, an emperor in the Northern Song Dynasty, was good at painting and famous for the painting of eagles. “赵子昂” was famous for the painting of horses. “好画” is homophonic with “好话” which means saying good words. “状元痘儿” refers to chicken pox which is a taboo word in Chinese traditional culture. If people have chicken pox or have measles, we mean they have joyful events. “状元” is the No. One scholar in the imperial examination in ancient China and it also refers to a joyful thing. Therefore, the second two-part saying is a pun.

The two translators used the translation technique of omission and abandoned the original images and translated the emotional attitude of the speaker in the two-part saying. Hawkes translated it as an irony, while Yang & Yang, as blame.

3.2 Cultural Loss

(1) Over-domestication

Over-domestication means to ignore the language form of the original and the cultural characteristics of the source language, to blindly pursue fluent and elegant translation, or even to use some expressions to show the unique style of the target language to make the translation sound like the original.

(2) Over-foreignization

Over-foreignization will ignore the needs of the readers and the lingual habits of the target language and pursue the corresponding form of the original, which results in obscure

translation. Over-foreignization will make the translation full of difficult, unpronounceable words and hard to read. This is called translationese.

(3) Zero translation

There is no accurate and definite concept or explanation for zero-translation so far. The so-called “zero translation” is that the sound and written form of the source language are directly transferred into the target language only at the word level, with no code-switching in the translation process at all.

By zero translation, the target readers have no way to understand the cultural factors in the original, which forms the barriers of cultural exchange.

(4) Mistranslation

The purpose of cultural exchange is for mutual understanding, mutual promotion and mutual development. Mistranslation is not conducive to cross-cultural communication. Misunderstanding, “distortion” or even “change” of the original may lead to the loss of some information so that the readers cannot see the truth of the source language culture.

3.3 Cultural Compensation

“Compensation is a technique which involves making up for the loss of a source text effect by recreating a similar effect in the target text through means that are specific to the target language and/or text.” (Harvey, 1998, p. 37) “This (compensation) is said to occur when loss of meaning, sound effect, metaphor or pragmatic effect in one part of a sentence is compensated in another part, or in a contiguous sentence.” (Newmark, 1988, p. 90) “In translating, (compensation is) the making good of some communicative loss by substituting equivalent effects.” (Hatim et al., 1990, p. 239) “This (compensation) means that one may either omit or play down a feature such as idiomatically at the point where it occurs in the source text and introduce it elsewhere in the target text.” (Baker, 1992, p. 78)

3.3.1 Zero compensation

Zero compensation involves keeping or omitting the cultural default. For example:

天天丢下筐儿弄扫帚。(Chapter 47)

Yand & Yang: Her work is never done.

Hawkes: ...always “putting the rake down to pick up the broom”.

“筐儿” is a kind of handmade farm tool in ancient China. It does not refer to “rake” as Hawkes’ version domesticates. We may have never seen such a farm tool. The sentence means Xifeng is very diligent, for she does her job continuously without a rest. The Lady Dowager praises her by saying like this. It’s unnecessary to translate the words like “筐儿” and “扫帚” in detail. Yang & Yang’ version omitted the cultural default, which not only expresses the exact meaning, links up the context, but also highlights Xifeng’s character and retains the meaning and style of the original.

Example 2:

林黛玉道：“兔死狐悲，物伤其类。” (Chapter 57)

Yand & Yang: Dai-yu exclaimed in distress and sympathy.

Hawkes: Dai-yu, feeling ‘the fox’s sympathy for the hunted hare’, was much distressed.

We know that the fox is the natural enemy of the hare. But we may not understand why a fox will feel sad and distressed after the death of a hare. The fox should feel happy. In fact, the idiom is taken from a fable story. It is used to be likened to sadness because of the death and unfortunateness of the same kind. It is a derogatory term. The translator can omit the images and only translate its implied meaning as Yang & Yang did. It shows that Daiyu felt depressed when she thought of Xiuyan’s unfavorable situation and her own lot.

3.3.2 Compensation in the Version

Direct compensating the deficient information in the version should be used. Free translation or the combination of literal and free translation is used without the help of notes. For example:

我成日家和人说笑，有个唐僧取经，就有个白马来驮他，刘智远打天下，就有个瓜精来送盔甲，有个凤丫头，就有个你。(Chapter 39)

Hawkes: I tell them: Just as you can’t imagine a Tripitaka going off to India to fetch the scriptures without his white horse or a Liu Zhi-yuan conquering the Empire without a Spirit of the Melon Fields to give him his armor, so you can’t imagine a Wang Xi-feng without a Patience alongside helping her.

Based on the actual pilgrimage of the monk Xuanzang to India in the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907), the story *Journey to the West* had already become a favorite of the Chinese people when Wu Cheng’en shaped it into a romantic novel which describes the Monkey King, also known as Sun Wukong, and his entourage protecting Xuanzang against all kinds of demons on an adventurous journey westward. Xuanzang was always riding a white horse that was helpful for him on the way to the West. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Li Wan compared Xifeng’s maid, Ping’er to the white horse of Xuanzang, indicating that Xifeng could not last a day without Ping’er’s company.

3.3.3 Compensation by Annotation

Literal translation is usually used in the version. The explanation related to cultural default is put in the annotations.

Example 1:

“难道这也是个痴丫头，又像颦儿来葬花不成？”因又自笑道：“若真也葬花，可谓东施效颦了；不但不为新奇，而是更是讨厌。” (Chapter 30)

Yang & Yang: “Can this be another absurd maid come to bury flowers like Daiyu?” he wondered in some amusement. “If so, she’s ‘Dong Shi imitating Xi Shi’, which isn’t original

but rather tiresome.”

Hawkes: “Can this be some silly maid come here to bury flowers like Frowner!” He wondered. He was reminded of Zhuangzi’s story of the beautiful Xi-shi’s ugly neighbor, whose endeavors to imitate the little frown that made Xi-shi captivating produced as aspect to hideous that people ran from her in terror.

(note: Xi Shi was a famous beauty in the ancient Kingdom of Yue. Dong Shi was an ugly who tried to imitate her ways.)

In the late of the Spring and Autumn period (722-476 BC), there lived a beautiful girl named Xi Shi. Her beauty had no match. Wherever she went, people welcomed her and appreciated her beauty. But she had been suffering from some heart trouble, which caused a pain in her chest. Although the pain was not very sharp, sometimes she still had to hold her hand to her chest and furrowed her brow when she walked. Seeing this, people felt sorry for her, but in the meantime, they also thought that it was the moment when Xi Shi looked most beautiful. As a result, Xi Shi was nicknamed ‘Delicate Beauty’. One day, an ugly girl named Dong Shi who lived nearby saw Xi Shi walking in the street, with her hand on her chest and furrowed brow. Astonished by the beauty, she decided to imitate Xishi. Therefore, when she went home, she also put her hands on her chest and had a frown on her face. But the poor girl didn’t know what she did only made her even more ugly. Now this idiom is used to describe unsuccessful imitations.

With the annotation as Hawkes did, the translator could not only keep the structure of the translation in line with the original, but infuse the source of the allusion to the readers.

Example 2:

“心较比干多一窍，病如西子胜三分。” (Chapter 3)

Yang & Yang: She looked more sensitive than Pi-kan, more delicate than His Shih.

Hawkes: 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.

Though a note is added by Yang & Yang, “Pi-kan, a prince noted for his great intelligence at the end of the Shang Dynasty”, Westerners still don’t know much about the bloody affairs happened to Pi-kan. It is said that he has got seven chambers in his heart. His nephew, Emperor Zhou, cut his chest open and had a look at his heart. As for Hsi Shih, a note is also added, “Hsi Shih, a famous beauty of the ancient Kingdom of Yueh”, but Westerners has still got a different image of Hsi Shih from the Chinese one.

Comparing this example to the above one, we see that the annotations should be in more details.

3.3.4 Compensation by Transformation

When the cultural connotation is too complicated, the implicit knowledge in the original should be transformed into explicit meaning. This method is called “compensation by

transformation”. For Example:

“芹儿呢，你便狠狠地说他一顿……还打发个人到水月庵，说老爷的谕：除了上坟烧纸，若有本家爷们到他那里去，不许接待。若再有一点不好风声，连老姑子一并撵了去。” (Chapter 94)

Yang & Yang: “As for Chin, you must give him a good talking...And send word to Water Moon Convent that, on the master’s orders, they’re not to receive young gentlemen from our house except when they go to sacrifice at one of the graves there. If there’s any more talk we’ll drive away the whole lot, including the old abbess.”

Hawkes: “As for Qin, I want you to tell him in no uncertain manner exactly what we think of him...Send someone to the Temple, with strict instructions from Sir Zheng that none of the male members of the clan is to be allowed in there, except for the specific purpose of burning paper-money at the grave-site. And if there is any more nonsense, we will have all the Sisters removed too.”

There is a custom offering sacrifice to the dead in the graves in China and also in the West among people showing their feelings to their late families, relatives or friends. But the customs in detail are different. Chinese people burn joss sticks, candles and ghost money besides offering wine, dishes, pastry and fruits. But in English, “go to sacrifice” means “to offer something, esp. an animal by killing it in a ceremony”, and the popular custom in western countries now is to offer a bunch of flowers before the graves instead. This illustrates the dynamic character of culture. So in the above version, Yang & Yang translated “上坟烧纸” into “go to sacrifice at one of the graves” which was implicit and only conveyed the pragmatic meaning, so did Hawkes’ version. The detail custom of “烧纸” was lost. The target readers still don’t know the Chinese traditional custom of “上坟烧纸”. They still don’t realize that they are reading a translated text from a foreign culture. Furthermore, if “上坟烧纸” is domesticated into “send a bunch of fresh flowers to the graves” as modern custom goes in the West, this kind of version shows no respect to Chinese traditional custom and history. The two English versions should be improved explicitly by transformation.

3.4 Relativity of Cultural Faithfulness

Faithfulness of cultural translation is relative and cultural translation is always subject to ideology, language and culture, social and time effectiveness and other factors.

(1) Subject to ideology

Ideology is the result of certain society and culture. No community would like to introduce any exotic culture conflicting with local ideology. “Behind the so-called exchanges of two cultures, there exists resistance of two ideologies.” (Wang, 2003, p. 17)

(2) Subject to language and culture

As there are differences between different languages and cultures, there is no complete correspondence between two languages. Then how can translation be completely “faithful”?

(3) Subject to social and time effectiveness

As a cultural phenomenon, translation is inextricably linked with the historical background. Its theory, standard and style are keeping pace with the times. Any translation activity is a kind of social behavior which must take social benefits as a criterion.

4. Conclusion

Culture and language are closely and intricately related. Since translation is an activity of cultural exchange, the translator is the cultural communicator between two languages. He should not only reproduce the language information of the original in the translation, but also try to express its cultural information faithfully. Through analyzing the translations of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, we can draw the conclusion that cultural faithfulness to the original text is first and foremost thing in literary translation, and the translator should use relevant strategies and translation methods to convert the cultural information in the original into that in the target text. For this purpose, the translator should avoid over-domestication, over-foreignization, zero translation and mistranslation and use zero compensation, compensation in translation, compensation by annotations and compensation by transformation to compensate the cultural default in specific translating process.

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