



## On the Preservation of Cultural Other in Literary Translation: A Case Study of the Translation of Chinese Literary Works

Xi Dong<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> College of Humanities and Foreign Languages, Xi'an University of Science and Technology, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China.

\* Corresponding author.

Received 19 November 2012; accepted 29 January 2013

### Abstract

With the cultural turn in translation, cultural other becomes obstacle in the interlingual communication. This thesis, through the examination of a number of cases of literary translation, claims that otherness, being unique and foreign, needs to be preserved in translation, in order to maintain the cultural diversity of the world.

**Key words:** Cultural turn; Cultural other; Literary translation; Diversity

Xi Dong (2013). On the Preservation of Cultural Other in Literary Translation: A Case Study of the Translation of Chinese Literary Works. *Canadian Social Science*, 9(1), 44-47. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/j.css.1923669720130901.1064>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.css.1923669720130901.1064>.

### 1. CULTURAL TURN IN TRANSLATION

Translation has long been described as a comparative linguistic understanding, but this has turned out to be too narrow a view. Now, more attention has been paid to culture transformation, therefore translation research became culturally oriented and led to a “cultural turn” in the late eighties (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990).

Nida points out “the role of language within a culture and influence of the culture on the meanings of words and idioms are so pervasive that scarcely any text can be adequately understood without careful consideration of its cultural background.” It is cultural difference that hinders the translators from accurately making transfers between two languages; it is also cultural difference that makes it difficult for the readers of target text to obtain

the real intention of the original author. It is no denying that different nations and areas share some similarities in culture. However, culture similarities are relative, while the difference is absolute. What are transparent or self-evident to the native speaker can most of the times create a vacuum of sense for the foreigner, therefore a potential discontinuity in their interpretation. This phenomenon is well known as the so-called “cultural default”, which is further defined as “the absence of relevant cultural background knowledge shared by the writer and his intended reader” (WANG, 2001).

Over several decades, worldwide economic, cultural and political activities have taken the world to the local and vice versa (Dudley, 1998). One of the outcomes of globalization is cultural other. Govern Sanderson in the paper *Existentialism, Globalisation and the Cultural Other* points out: the idea of cultural other is intimately associated with globalization, for it is about who we are and who they are and what happens when the two meet. It is about our world and their world and what happens when they both collide. It is about me and you, the colonist and the colonized, the cultured and the barbarian, the familiar and the strange, the in-group and the out-group, A-groupers and B-groupers, the north and the south.... Literary translation, to a very great extent, is cultural communication, in which the confrontation of cultural other widely exists. Apparently, while translating, to eliminate cultural other enlarges the gap between different cultures, and the “fear of unknown” won’t help any better understanding of literary works. A right attitude towards the preservation of cultural other is of significance to the translators.

### 2. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL OTHER

#### 2.1 The Faithful Reproduction of Style

The theorists, concerned with the particular field

of literary translation, have unexceptionally paid considerable attention to the preservation of the stylistic properties of texts. Literary works are a kind of art created in language. What we demand of translation of literary works is not merely the recoding of content, but also of the style of the original text.

According to the *Revised Edition of Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Cuddon, 1979), style is “the characteristic manner of expressing in prose or verse; how a particular writer says things. The analysis and assessment of style involves examination of a writer’s choice of words, his figure of speech, the devices (rhetorical and otherwise), the shape of his sentences (whether they be loose or periodic), the shape of paragraphs – indeed, of every conceivable aspect of his language and the way which he uses it.” Theodore Savory considers style as “the essential characteristic of every piece of writing, the outcome of the writer’s personality and his emotions at the moment, and no single paragraph can be put together without revealing in some degree the nature of its author.” (Theodore Savory, 1957) In short, “style is the man,” as de Buffoon put it. Style may be compared to the tone and voice of the writer himself, which is as much particular to him as his laugh, his walk, his handwriting and facial expression.

The above quotations, with no exception, prove that the preservation of stylistic features is desirable because it gives an accurate representation of the original. If a translator persisted in not taking the style of the original author into consideration, no doubt, he could never achieve satisfactory results. Such is the case with the four English versions of Homer’s *Iliad and Odyssey*.

“Cowper’s diction is not a Homer’s diction, nor his nobleness as Homer’s nobleness; but it is in movement and grammatical style that he is most unlike Homer. Pope’s rapidness is not of the same sort as Homer’s rapidness, nor is his plainness of ideas and his nobleness as Homer’s plainness of ideas and nobleness; but it is in the artificial character of his style and diction that he is most unlike Homer. Chapman’s movement, words, style, and manner are often far enough from resembling Homer’s movement, words, style, and manner; but it is the fantasticality of his ideas that puts him farthest from resembling Homer. Mr. Newman’s movement, grammatical style and ideas are a thousand times in strong contrast with Homer’s. Still it is by the oddness of his diction and ignobleness of his manner that he contrasts with Homer the most violently.”

—Mathew, Arnold

The above analysis is quoted from Mathew Arnold’s criticism. Admittedly, translation is not purely a technical change in the form of language, but it requires that the translator realize the author’s process of artistic creation, grasp the spirit of the original, find the most appropriate confirmation in his own thought, feeling and experience, and reproduce fully and correctly the content and form of the original in a literary language suited to the original style.

Thus the main task of literary translation lies in the faithful reproduction of the style. Especially, with the

calling of maintaining cultural other in the translated works, the requirement of such faithfulness is of importance.

## 2.2 The Appealing Exhibition of Foreignness

Shakespeare’s sonnet “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” has always been mentioned in the literature of translation. Bassnett holds that “this sentence cannot be literally translated into a language where summers are unpleasant, just as the concept of God the farther cannot be translated into a language where the deity is female.” However, Bassnett has been criticized by many scholars, including Peter Newmark, who disagreed to such claim by suggesting that the reader should get a vivid impression from the content of the sonnet the beauty of summer in England, and reading the poem should exercise his imagination as well as introduce him to England culture (Newmark, 1982).

Example (1)

“I bet you can’t spell my name,” say I.

“I bet you, what you dare I can,” says he.

“All right,” say I “go ahead.”

“**George Jaxon – then now**,” says he.

(Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*)

Chinese version 1:

“我敢说你准不知道我的名字是哪几个字，”我说。

“我敢说你这可难不住我，我知道，”他说。

“好吧，”我说，“你说说看”。

“**养麦的养，自治的治，清洁的洁，克服的克，孙子的孙—怎么样**，”他说。

(张友松、张振先 译)

The two translators strive effort to substitute English names with Chinese characters. However Chinese readers consider it ridiculous to render English names in completely Chinese way. Now let’s take a look at the second version.

Chinese version 2:

“我敢说你不会拼我的名字，”我说。

“我敢说，你能行的事我也能行，”他说。

“那好，”我说，“就拼拼看。”

“**G-e-o-r-g-e J-a-x-o-n—怎么样**，”他说。

(张万里 译)

Example (2)

Joe, a clumsy and timid horseman, did not look to the advantage in the saddle, “Look at him, Amelia dear, driving into the parlor window. **Such a bull in a china shop** I never saw.” (William Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*)

乔胆子小，骑术又拙，骑在鞍子上老不像样。

“爱米丽亚，亲爱的，快看他骑到人家客厅的窗子里去了。我一辈子没见过这样儿，真是大公牛闯到瓷器店了。” (杨必 译)

Foreignness and fresh expressions in the above example provides the target readers with great interest in reading. While translating, reader’s expectation should always be taken into consideration, that is, the expectation for the foreign beauty and exotic flavor. One of the essential tasks of translation is to introduce “foreignness”, and during

the process of reading, readers automatically expect to see different sceneries and different conditions of existence. Improper explication will definitely ruin this expectation.

More importantly, “communication is seen as a matter of enlarging mutual cognitive environment.” (Gutt, 2001) This statement is especially true in the age of information. People around the world share much more knowledge than ever before; therefore, they are eager to know more. As part of culture, language in its development also needs some stimulants. New words and expressions from foreign cultures largely stimulate the development of language.

For example:

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

以眼还眼，以牙还牙。

Though this expression is perfectly accepted in China, it is originated from an English idiom in the Bible:

If men hurt a woman with child...and if any mischief follows, then thou shalt give life for life, **eye for eye, tooth for tooth**, hand for hand, foot for foot.

(Exodus. xxi. 24)

Nowadays, in the cultural context of globalization, the readers expect the translator to convey the foreign spirit of the source language and culture. “we should consider foreignness as a provocation, as something fascinating, as an opportunity to foster healthy dialogue,” (Schutle, 2001) and with the proper maintaining of the cultural other, the translator may lead the readers into the foreign atmosphere of the other language.

### 3. A CASE STUDY OF THE TRANSLATION OF CHINESE LITERARY WORKS

Example (1)

枕前发尽千般愿，

要休且待青山烂。

水面上秤锤浮，

直待黄河彻底枯。

(无名氏，《菩萨蛮》)

English version:

On the pillow we make thousand vows, and say

**Our love will last unless green mountains rot away,**

**On the water can float a lump of lead,**

**The Yellow River dries up to the very bed.**

(许渊冲 译)

This is a love poem. The lovers' promises and their faithful love can easily be understood by our human beings. Though it was written in ancient China, the contextual assumptions remain the same both home and abroad. The intended interpretation can successfully be achieved even in the western cognitive environment. The target readers may be deeply moved by the oriental beauty achieved by maintaining the otherness.

(2) 只因薛蟠是天性得陇望蜀的，如今娶了金桂，见

金桂的丫头宝蟾有三分姿色，举止轻浮可爱，便时常要茶要水的，故意撩逗她。

(曹雪芹，《红楼梦》)

Now Hsueh Pan was a living example of the saying “**to covet the land of Shu after getting the region of Lung.**” After marrying Chin-kuei, he was stuck by her maid Pao-chan's charms. As she seemed approachable as well as alluring, he often flirted with her when asking to fetch him tea or water.

(杨宪益、戴乃迭 译)

“得陇望蜀” is used to describe people who are too greedy to be satisfied. “Shu” and “Lung” are region names in ancient China. Although in the rendering, the two names are directly translated without any notes, target readers can still guess its meaning from the context. The expression may sounds strange at first, however well preserves the original cultural elements and arouses the interest of reading.

(3) 这是七月下旬，合中国旧历的三伏，一年最热的时候。

(《围城》钱钟书)

It was towards the end of July, equivalent to the period of the lunar calendar “**san-fu**” – the hottest days of the year.

(by Jeanne Kelly, Nathan K. Mao)

“三伏”，unique to Chinese culture, is China's ancient solar term expression, meaning the hottest days in the year. The translator adopts transliteration as “san-fu” and explains it as the hottest days of the year. The alienation completely preserves the primitive simplicity of Chinese folk culture.

(4) 咳，这一来，竹篮打水一场空了！

(梁斌，《红旗谱》)

Ah, we were **drawing water in a bamboo basket.**

(5) (平儿道) 如今赵姨娘屋里起了脏来也容易，我只怕又伤着一个好人的体面。别人都不必管，只这一个人岂不又生气？我可怜的是他，不肯为“**打老鼠伤了玉瓶了**”。(曹雪芹，《红楼梦》)

Actually, I could easily find the evidence in concubine Chao's rooms, but I was afraid that would make another good person lose face. Other people wouldn't mind, but she'd certainly be angry. It was her I was thinking of. I didn't want to **smash a jade vase to catch a rat.**

(杨宪益、戴乃迭 译)

(6) “不要失了你的时！你自己觉得中了一个相公，**“就癞蛤蟆想吃起天鹅来！”** (吴敬梓，《儒林外史》)

“Don't be a fool!” he roared. “Just passing one examination has turned your head completely-**you are like a toad trying to swallow a swan!**” (杨宪益、戴乃迭 译)

The above examples prove that cultural other can provide the target readers with the beauty of foreign expressions.

---

## CONCLUSION

---

The preservation of cultural other is the rebirth of literary works in foreign soil, which will at first experience the stage of being alienated, yet the fresh novel taste destines to win the reader's appreciation. Take Mo Yan as an example, his winning of the Nobel Prize in literature in 2012 has largely attributed to Howard Goldblatt, a well-known translator for his profound understanding of the Chinese language and culture. Mo Yan's works are full of keen observation and lively reproduction of Chinese society several decades ago. The direct rendering of the Chinese flavor in the translated versions exhibits great appealing to the foreign readers, and Howard's faithful preservation of the cultural other, to a great extent, explains the success of Mo Yan's popularity in world literature. Being foreign means being unique and attractive. Globalization, from certain aspects, unifies different ideologies and cultures, therefore otherness needs to stand out and speak out, for it is diversity that can truly stimulate cultural development.

---

## REFERENCES

---

Arnold, Mathew (1919). *On Translating Homer, in Essays – Literary and Critical* (p. 215). Everyman's Library.

- Bassnett-Meguire, Susan (1980). *Translation Studies*. UK: The Chaucer Press.
- Cuddon, J. A. (1979). *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (p. 663). Great Britain: W&J. Mackay Limited, Chatham.
- Govern, Sanderson (2004). Existentialism, Globalisation and the Cultural Other. *International Education Journal*, 4(4).
- Gutt, Ernest August (1991). *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell.
- Levevere, Andre (Ed.). (1992). *Translation/History/Culture – A Sourcebook*. London: Routledge.
- LIU, Zhongde (1991). *Ten Lectures on Literary Translation*. China: Translation and Publishing Corporation.
- Nida, Eugene A. (1964). *Toward a Science of Translating*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Peter, Newmark (1983). *Approaches to Translation*. China: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Savory, Theodore (1957). *The Art of Translation* (p. 54). London: Jonathan Cape, Thirity Bedford Square.
- Venuti, L. (1995). *The Translator's Invisibility – A History of Translation*. Lontledge: London and New York.
- WANG, Dongfeng (2001). *Cultural Default and Translation Compensation, Culture and Transaltion*. Beijing: China Translation Publishing Company.
- <http://www.docin.com/p-343556090.html>
- <http://wenku.baidu.com/view/24ca76d133d4b14e85246843.html>
- <http://222.169.194.110:8080/old/ll/article.asp?id=2805>