



Foreignizing Translation on Chinese Traditional Funeral Culture in the Film *Ju Dou*

PENG Xiamei^{[a],*}; WANG Piaodi^[a]

^[a]School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

*Corresponding author.

Supported by The Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (JB2017074).

Received 15 April 2017; accepted 17 July 2017
 Published online 26 July 2017

Abstract

China is a country with more than five thousand years of traditional cultures, which is broad and profound. With the increasing international status of China in recent years, more and more countries are interested in China and its traditional culture as well. Film and television works, as efficient mediums of communication, has played a very important role in cultural communication. Taking the funeral scenes in the film *Ju Dou* of Zhang Yimou for example, this paper analyzes the traditional funeral culture under the framework of foreignization, a translation strategy proposed by Lawrence Venuti. It aims to discover more traditional culture through literary works, and promote cultural exchanges and development at the same time.

Key words: *Ju Dou*; Funeral culture; Foreignizing translation

Peng, X. M., & Wang, P. D. (2017). Foreignizing Translation on Chinese Traditional Funeral Culture in the Film *Ju Dou*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 15(1), 47-50. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/9758>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/9758>

1. ZHANG YIMOU AND HIS FILM *JU DOU*

Zhang Yimou, a Chinese film director, one of the representatives of “fifth generation directors” and an actor as well, have won many awards both at home and abroad.

Since *Red Sorghum*, the first film directed by him has won the Golden Bear on February 23th, 1988, Zhang and his films produced a series of surprises for the Chinese people and the world (Ban, 2003). He was said to be one of the most advanced figures in Chinese movies, and his films are regarded as a symbol of Chinese contemporary culture.

In Zhang’s films, you’ll see a profound understanding of Chinese traditional feudal consciousness and strong critical spirit, which proves to be a strong sense of history and life consciousness. It’s a peculiar landscape of traditional folk customs and also praises for women’s rebellious spirit. The constant exploration and innovation in the film style and language represent the rise of a new film trend. The traces of folk customs, distinctive national color and regional customs...not only provide the audience with information about Chinese folk culture ... but also serve as a bridge between Chinese films and the audiences of the world (Cai, 2008). Therefore, the study on Zhang’s film is of great rationality and necessity.

Ju Dou is one of the successful films and was the first Chinese film to be nominated for Oscar’s best foreign language film. It is adapted from Liu Heng’s novel *Fu Xi*, *Fu Xi*, directed by Zhang Yimou and Yang Fengliang, and starring Gong Li and Li Baotian. It is a tragedy that happened in a dye mill of a small town in China in the 1920s. In this thesis, the author mainly excerpts the funeral of the dye mill owner and analyzes about four major elements of the funeral to talk about the application of foreignizing translation in the traditional culture.

2. VENUTI’S THEORY OF DOMESTICATION AND FOREIGNIZATION

Translation is the act of transforming linguistic information into another language on the basis of accuracy and fluency. Traditionally, people’s understanding of the nature of translation is limited to the transmission

of meaning or the equivalence of function between different languages, but little attention has been paid to the factors beyond meaning and function (Xiong, 2003). However, in recent decades, people tended to realize the importance of cultural factors in the process of translation. In 1990, Bassnett, a representative of the cultural school of translation and Lefevere has formally put forward “translation of the cultural turn” in their book *Translation, History and Culture* (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990). Since then, the function of cross-cultural communication has attracted more and more interest from translators, and some arguments on the cultural factors in translation have been discussed over a long period of time. As a result, the debate about domestication and foreignization rise to the surface. In addition, whether in contemporary or in history, the principle of taking target language culture as the end result (namely domestication) seems to have prevailed in terms of translation practice (Guo, 1998).

Schleiermacher, a German famous translation theorist thought that there were two translation theories, “One is to lead the reader to approach the author, and the other is to lead the author to the reader.” Under this background, Venuti classified them into “domestication” and “foreignization”.

Venuti defines domestication as “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to targetlanguage cultural values, bringing the author back home” (Venuti, 1995, p.20). Domesticating translation requires the translator to be closer to the target language reader. The translator should speak like the native, if the original author wants to have a direct dialogue with the reader, the translation must become averitable native language. Domesticating translation can help the readers better understand the translation, and enhance the readability and appreciation of the translation. While Venuti questioned and criticized the domesticating translation centered on the native culture, and he thought that it was a kind of cultural invasion to naturalize the foreign things into our own (Tan, 2013, p.245).

Venuti defines foreignization as “an ethnoveviant pressure on target language cultural values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad” (Venuti, 1995, p.20). In Venuti’s literary translation works, he advocates to express the cultural differences in the target texts instead of aiming at the exclusion of other racial features in translation. The purpose of foreignization is to consider the cultural differences in different nations, preserve and reflect the features of different nations and language styles, and to retain the exoticism for the target readers, which are also the basic idea of deconstruction translation theory.

The reform and opening-up policy has been implemented in China for more than 20 years when *Ju Dou* was adopted onto the screen and thus entered people’s sight. With China’s opening-up policy being carried out to the next stage, the sustainable development of the

national economy and also frequent cultural exchanges, more and more western countries come to know and understand China, and are even interested in Chinese traditional culture. However, there is little interaction between Chinese and Western cultures and languages. It will inevitably lead to the absence of the unique Chinese traditional culture if a better understanding of the Chinese culture for the Western readers is only considered, or even to further enrich and develop their native cultures; what’s more, the correspondence of some Chinese traditional cultural elements cannot be found in Western culture, which make the translation strategy of domesticating translation not applicable here. On the other hand, foreignizing translation can not only show the authentic “Chinese characteristics”, but also provide more about the “peripheral knowledge” by the added notes and so on, serving multiple ends. According to the characteristics of the specific objects studied in the thesis, foreignizing translation is more appropriate.

3. FUNERAL CULTURE IN JU DOU AND THE ANALYSIS

Having talked about the different translation strategies and the more appropriate one for this thesis in the last chapter, let’s move to the specific cases to support it. Here are mainly four major funeral elements in the film to be discussed: block the path, sit on the coffin, mysterious number “7” and burial, all of which have a deeper underlying meaning.

3.1 Block the Path

In the film, Ju Dou and her lover Yang Tianqing are required to block the path when the funeral of Yang Jinshan, Ju Dou’s real husband, is in progress, so as to show their loyalty. They’re waiting for the funeral procession on the other side of the road, on their knees, and when someone in the procession shouts “block the path!”, they rise to their feet and run to the coffin, screaming and crying to stop the coffin; later, they are reclined on the ground so the coffin can pass over them; finally they creep from the ground and run back to where they wait. That’s only once of “blocking the path”.

In fact, to “block the path” is to “block the coffin’s path”, which means “挡棺” in Chinese, and the destination of the path blocked is somewhere the dead to be buried. In Chinese traditional funeral culture, lineal relatives of the dead will wait in the route of the funeral in advance, and when the funeral procession approaches, they will run to them quickly and batter the coffin, screaming and shouting the words they want the dead to know, like “don’t go!”, “don’t leave me alone!”, “take me away!” and so on, expressing their sadness and attachment.

In this scene, “挡棺” is literally translated into “block the path”, which directly shows the behavior and emotion

of the action executors. The choice of the verb “挡” is also of importance, the second explanation of the verb “block” in the fifth edition of *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* is “block sb’s way/ path/ exit / escape etc., to stand in front of someone, so that they cannot go past”, which happens to fit the context here.

3.2 Zuo Guan

Another scene that impressed the audience is that Yang Tianbai, Ju Dou’s son sits on the coffin in the funeral process, holding Yang Jinshan’s temporary memorial tablet in his hands. It is “坐棺” in Chinese, which has another deep meaning behind the phrase. “坐棺” and “做官” are homophones in Chinese, of which the latter means “to be an official”. In some regions in China, when the old dies, one of the juniors will sit on the coffin, expressing good wishes for the descendants to win promotion and get rich. However, not every one of the juniors has the opportunity to sit on the coffin. Generally, if an old man dies, his granddaughter sits on the coffin; while if an old woman dies, her grandson sits on the coffin.

In this scene, “坐棺” is transliterated into “Zuo Guan”. In the author’s opinion, this translation version directly shows not only the Chinese traditional custom, the good wishes from elders—Yang Tianbai is the only son of Yang Jinshan, and the only descendant of the whole Yang family as well, so there is no doubt that everyone has good wishes for Yang Tianbai. Besides, the translation shows the beauty of Chinese—homophone. There is inseparable relationship between language and culture. The essence of language lies in the interaction and restriction between language and culture. Language is the carrier of information, and language itself is information, this information is the cultural antecedents of the nation (Wang, 1996, p.103). The analysis and use of homophones will provide the people with a new perspective to understand the cultural phenomenon of our country and to look into society in a comprehensive way.

3.3 Mysterious Number “7”

In the film, Ju Dou and Yang Tianqing are asked to block the path for 49 times, seven times seven. Why is it 49 and what’s the mystery of “7”?

“7” is a mysterious number both in Chinese and Western cultures. In China, people have two opposite emotions towards “7”: love and fear. On one hand, “7” is the sum of “Yin and Yang” and “the five elements” in Chinese traditional culture, which have close connection with the truth and kindness. For example, the Goddess’s seven daughters. On the other hand, “7” is often associated with death. For example, in the Chinese folk funeral and sacrificial activities, the seventh day after a person’s death is “tou qi”, the twenty-first day is “san qi”, the thirty-fifth day is “wu qi” and the forty-ninth day is the end, “wei qi” (Wang, 2010). While in the western culture, “7” is totally

sacred and auspicious. For example, seven virtues and seven sacraments.

A simple number “7” is not only a compute sign, but also a special language symbol which carries much cultural information, and through the study of “7”, the English learners will learn language culture as well since language and culture are indispensable (Song, 2014).

As for “seven times seven”, it is another important content of Chinese traditional funeral custom, and has a long history and profound influence. The worship of the number “7” from the ancients and the consequent “Qi Yu ceremony” of Confucianism (it means a sacrifice is given every seven days after the death of a man, seven times should be completed continuously till the forty-ninth day) may be the source of “seven times seven” (Liu & Xu, 2010). What’s more, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have all played an important role in promoting the development and enriching the contents of the funeral custom of “seven times seven”.

While in modern life, people tend to shorten “seven times seven” days as the ever increasing pace of life. Take the shortened “twenty four days” as an example, people take the first and last seven days, and take every two days as a “seven” for the rest. It can be seen that the traditional culture is in the process of constant changes differing from the social environment and historical period.

In the author’s opinion, for some words or phrases which have complex meanings or different implied meanings, it is better to translate them literally in case of confusing understanding, then some necessary notes or explanations should be added immediately and closely to make it clear.

3.4 Burial

Burial (土葬) is one of the funeral rites after people’s death, and it is known all over the world. In the film, the funeral procession carried Yang Jinshan’s coffin all the way to bury it. In China, there is an idiom “入土为安”, which means burial brings peace to the deceased and it exactly indicates this kind of funeral. The tradition of burial dates back to primitive society, and the formation of this custom has a close relationship with people’s concepts. People believe that the whole body of the dead should be kept intact and only by burying the dead in the soil can make them rest in peace after a long life journey because soil is the inevitable destination for them, and in that way, the living may feel a trace of consolation.

Burial is different from cremation (火葬), water cremation (水葬), and celestial burial (天葬), it is to put the body in the coffin and bury the coffin in the soil. Sometimes people put up a tombstone in front of the tomb, in which says some mourning words for the future generations to memorize. Besides, cremation is to burn the body to ashes and put them in urns, bury them in the soil, or sprinkle them in the water or air; water cremation is to put the body or ashes into the river, lake or sea;

celestial burial is a traditional funeral rite in Tibet, the bodies are exposed to birds of prey in this way to realize the transmigration of souls. Although they differ a lot in terms of form, they still have something in common: They represent a kind of belief, a way to mourn the dead, and essentially, they are a social and cultural phenomenon.

However, burial has caused a series of environmental problems. On one hand, the decomposition of the bodies and the coffin itself both do pollute the soil and water around; on the other hand, burial takes up so much space that it limits people's normal productive activities. Up to now, burial is banned in most cities in China, but still adopted in some underdeveloped areas where people have backward thoughts.

In conclusion, the following two principles should be taken into consideration when dealing with the choice of domestication and foreignization on cultural factors in translation: a) whether the translation is conducive to the accurate and smooth transmission of the original meaning; b) whether the translation is conducive to the cultural exchanges and communication among different languages (Xiong, 2003).

CONCLUSION

It is no doubt that apart from the above-mentioned cases of cultural factors and their underlying meanings, there are still more to be explored. Through the above discussion, it can be concluded that the alternative use of literal translation and transliteration achieves its effect, since by means of which the unique charm of Chinese traditional culture and the author's original meaning can be retained as much as possible. Definitely, it cannot be generalized that literal translation and transliteration are

the corresponding translation methods of foreignizing translation. In different cultures and different scenes, the specific translation methods and strategies still need to be analyzed. It is hoped that more people can devote themselves in this field and their research findings will provide reference in return.

REFERENCES

- Ban, Y. B. (2003). *Essay on the adaptation art of Zhang's film*. Fujian Normal University.
- Bassnett, S., & Lefevere, A. (1990). *Translation, history and culture*. London and New York: Printer Publisher.
- Cai, Z. Y. (2008). *Folk cultural elements and anthropological value in Zhang Yimou's films*. Fudan University.
- Guo, J. Z. (1998). Cultural factors in translation: Foreignization and domestication. *Foreign Languages*, (2), 17.
- Liu, M., & Xu, C. W. (2010). A Source researching on the funeral custom of "seven times seven". *Folklore Studies*, (2), 109.
- Song, A. M. (2014). Comparison of English and Chinese cultural connotations of the number "7". *Modern Chinese*, (12), 138-140.
- Tan, Z. X. (2013). *A short history of translation in the West*. Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Venuti, L. (1995). *Translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Wang, C. Q. (2010). Comparison of English and Chinese cultural metaphorical meaning of the number "7". *Master*, (22), 18-20.
- Wang, X. J. (1996). *The general theory of rhetoric*. Nanjing, China: Nanjing University Press.
- Xiong, B. (2003). Domestication and foreignization in cultural exchange translation. *Chinese Science and Technology Translators Journal*, (03), 5-9.