Cultural Default and Translation Compensation in *Red Poppies*

WU Jiaping[a],*; WANG Junxuan[b],*; SUN Li[c]

[a] Associate professor. College of Foreign Language, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.
[b] College of Foreign Language, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.
[c] Lecturer, College of Foreign Language, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.
*Corresponding author.

Abstract

Cultural default is a common phenomenon in literary works. It will not cause obstacles to the understanding of original readers who share cultural background with the author, but for readers of the target language, cultural differences may create vacuum of meaning for them, so it is necessary to make compensation for the cultural default in the translation process. Taking *Red Poppies* as the research object, this paper makes a classified study of cultural default, and analyzes the compensation methods in Howard Goldblatt's translation.

Key words: Red Poppies; Cultural default; Translation compensation

INTRODUCTION

Red Poppies is one of the representative works of Tibetan novelist A Lai. Under the background of Tibetan chieftain system, this novel describes the story of Maichi chieftain family. The novel uses the perspective of the Maichi chieftain's foolish son as the narrative angle, which is the special feature of this novel. In addition, there are many descriptions in the book shows the readers the life customs, political system and religious beliefs in Tibet at that time. In 2002, the English version of the book was published. It was translated by famous Chinese-English translator Howard Goldblatt and his wife Sylvia Li-chun Lin. The English version of the book was free translated into Red Poppies, rather than The Dust Settles, which is its literal translation.

The author of this novel uses many cultural defaults in the writing process to improve the writing efficiency, which affects the foreign readers' understanding of this novel to a certain extent, and may even hinder the spread of Chinese national culture. Therefore, the study of cultural default and translation compensation in the process of translation is of great literary value and translation significance.

1. CULTURAL DEFAULT

1.1 Introduction of Cultural Default

Default refers to the omission of common background knowledge by both parties in the communication process. There are three kinds of defaults, which are situational default, contextual default and cultural default. If the default is related to context, it belongs to situational defaults; if the default is related to discourse information, it belongs to contextual defaults; and if the omitted content is related to culture, it is a cultural default.

Gillion Brown and George Yule stated that cultural play a vital role in translation, and default is an unavoidable phenomenon in communication. Nida pointed that there is always some loss in verbal communication and he proposed some methods for information loss. In China, cultural default was put forward by Wang

Dongfeng, in his paper *Cultural Default and Coherent Reconstruction in Translation* (1997), he states that when people communicate with others, he often omitted shared background knowledge or Pragmatic premises, and when the omission is about culture, it was called cultural default. And Wang Dalai divided defaults into three categories: situational default, contextual default and cultural default.

1.2 Cultural Defaults in *Red Poppies*

Nida classified culture into five types, namely ecological culture, material culture, social culture, religious culture, and linguistic culture. According to Nida's classification, this paper divided cultural defaults into three categories: social cultural default, religious cultural default, and material cultural default. The following part will study the cultural defaults by analyzing examples.

1.2.1 Material Cultural Default

People's living habits and living environment can often reflect the material culture of a region or a nation. Therefore, material culture includes people's dressing preferences, eating habits and architectural styles. There are lots of material cultural defaults in Red Poppies, such as "玉石镯子", "牛毛毯子", "银腰带" and so on.

Example 1

ST: 桑吉卓玛把一只精致的匣子捧到她面前, 里面是土司太太左手的玉石镯子和右手的象牙镯子。太太戴上镯子, 在手腕上转了一圈说: "我又瘦了。"（A Lai, 1998, p.2）

TT: Sangye Dolma offered up an exquisite box containing a jade bracelet for her mistress's left arm and an ivory bracelet for the right. Mother put on the bracelets and twirled them around her wrists. "I've lost more weight." (Goldblatt, 2002, p.4)

The above example describes the daily wear of chieftain's wife, she wears jade bracelet on her left hand, and ivory bracelet on her right hand. We all know that jewelry is valuable, but chieftain's wife not only wears jewelry, but also wears different jewelry between her two hands. From the appearance of the chieftain's wife we can see that the Maichi chieftain is a very rich, and this description can also help readers infer the family background of chieftains. Besides, the "jade bracelet" and "ivory bracelet" can not all made in Tibetan, so the readers can infer that Tibet has trade with other places. If the foreign readers do not know that the "jade bracelet" and "ivory bracelet" was not made in Tibetan they can not know the trade situation in Tibet. This is the characteristic of cultural default, if the readers know the cultural default, they can deduce the background information from this cultural default. If they don't know the cultural default, they can't grasp the background information from this sentence.

Example 2

ST: 三天下来，连官寨前广场上都扔满了新鲜的牛羊骨头。家奴们把这些骨头堆成一座小小的山头。（A Lai, 1998, p.33）

TT: At the end of those three days, the square in front of the house was littered with fresh cattle and sheep bones, which the family slaves piled into a small hill. (Goldblatt, 2002, p.39）

This example express the eating habits of chieftain family, there are lots of cattle and sheep in Tibet, so people are more accustomed to eating beef and mutton, but not chicken, fish or other meat. If the readers don't know that Tibet has a lot cattle and sheep, they may confuse why they ate so much beef and mutton. And from "a small hill", readers can gain that the chieftain family prepared plenty of food to greet guests, they are very hospitable and generous, besides, it also reflects the wealth of the chieftain family.

1.2.2 Social Cultural Default

Social culture includes a nation's custom, life style, tradition, values and social fairs and so on. Tibetan names also belong to social cultural, they are different from those of the mainland of China, and they are generally four words, the examples are listed below:

桑吉卓玛	Sangye Dolma
索郎泽郎	Sonam Tserang
德钦莫措	Dechen Motso
旦真贡布	Tamding Gongpo
翁波意西	Wangpo Yeshi
查查头人	Headman Tratra
麦其土司	Chieftain Maichi
银匠曲扎	Silversmith Choedak
济嘎活佛	Living Buddha,Jeeka
行刑人尔依	Executioner Aryi

The top five names in the table are common Tibetan names, they were translated into two words according to their pronunciation. In western country, people's name consists of two words, the first word is their own name and the last word is their family name. Therefore, in order to match the name style of the target readers', the translator translated the names of Tibet into two words. However, in order to highlight the social cultural characteristics of Tibetan, the translators translated the names according to their pronunciation. In this way, the target readers can know the social culture of Tibet without being confused.

The top five names in the table are combined the Tibetan names with the identity title. For example, "银匠曲扎" is translated into "Silversmith Choedak", the "silversmith" is the character's identity or the character's profession, and "Choedak" is his name. This kind of translation can not only express the name style of Tibet, but also let the target readers know the social status of the character. In addition, there is another name in the novel, that is, "黄初民特派员", it was translated into "special emissary Huang Chumin", "黄初民" is a

common Chinese name, thus it was translated according to conventional Chinese name translation method. And "特派员" was literal translated into "special emissary".

Example 3

ST: 欢呼胜利的声音立即在夜空里响了起来。大火烧起来了, 酒坛也一一打开, 人们围着火堆和酒坛跳起舞来。(A Lai, 1998, p.31)

TT: Victorious shouts erupted in the night sky; a bonfire was lit and liquor vats were opened. People danced around the fire and the vats. (Goldblatt, 2002, p.35)

The example 3 shows a common way to celebrate in Tibet, when there is victory or other happy events, they would dance and sing around the fire to express their excitement and happiness. What's more, this reflects the unique social culture of Tibet, because different places have different ways of celebrating victory, so readers can clearly see the way of celebrating in Tibet from this example.

1.2.3 Religious Cultural Default

Religious culture refers to a nation's religion, in China, the Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism have a dominant influence on Chinese people, while in western country, it is the Christianity that has deep influence on people's mind. So the foreign readers may not understand Chinese religious cultural defaults. It is the translator's responsibility to know the original work's religious culture.

Example 4

ST: 父亲并不十分在意, 叫管家带上十个银元和一包茶叶, 送到刚刚死了私生子的德钦莫措那里, 使她能施一道斋僧茶, 给死娃娃做个小小的道场。(A Lai, 1998, p.5)

TT: Not terribly concerned, my father told the steward to take ten silver dollars and a packet of tea to Dechen Motso, whose illegitimate son had just died, so she could pay for a vegetarian meal and tea for the monks to perform rites for the dead. (Goldblatt, 2002, p.7)

"斋僧茶" and "道场" are religious word that related to Buddhism, in Tibet, Buddhism has a profound influence in people's mind, they think they need lamas to do something to help the person rest in peace after they die. But the target readers may not understand this phenomenon as they lack of cultural background knowledge, so the translator needs to explain this phenomenon to the target reader, in this sentence's translation version, "斋僧茶" and "道场" are translated into "a vegetarian meal" and "perform rites", these words are simple words for the target readers to understand, and it could produce similar effects on target readers' mind.

Example 5

ST: 要是我是个聪明的家伙, 说不定早就命归黄泉了, 不能坐在这里, 就着一个茶壶胡思乱想了。(A Lai, 1998, p.3)

TT: If I'd been born smart, I might have long since departed this world for the Yellow Springs instead of sitting here and thinking wildly thoughts over a cup of tea. (Goldblatt, 2002, p.5)

About the word "黄泉", in Chinese culture, it refers to the place where people live after they die. The water in the deep spring is yellow, and because people are buried deeply under the ground after death, so "黄泉" is used to refer to the place where the dead live. And "命丧黄泉" is a euphemism for people dying.

In the above sections, we have analyzed that the author often use cultural defaults in his work, by doing this, the writing can be more concise and time-saving. But for translation, the cultural defaults may cause various problems, such as cultural loss or misunderstanding. Therefore, it is necessary to take appropriate compensation methods for the cultural defaults in translation. In the next part, this paper will give an study of translation compensation for the cultural defaults in Red Poppies, to illustrate how Howard Goldblatt dealt with the cultural defaults.

2. TRANSLATION COMPENSATION FOR CULTURAL DEFAULTS IN *RED POPPIES*

Howard Goldblatt has used several compensation methods in his translation for cultural defaults, this section is going to study them and to find their effectiveness by example analysis.

2.1 Literal Translation

Literal translation refers to transplant the original cultural schema into translation without explanation, this method suits for the simple cultural defaults. And when the target readers are familiar with this cultural background knowledge, the translator can use this method.

Example 6

ST: "你以为他来干好事？请神容易送神难！"(A Lai, 1998, p.34)

TT: "Did you actually think he came here for our good? It's easy to send for a deity, but hard to get rid of one." (Goldblatt, 2002, p.40)

Example 7

ST: "广济灾民, 超度亡灵吧"。(A Lai, 1998, p.68)

TT: "Aid the survivors and recite prayers for the dead". (p.76)

"请神容易送神难" is a Chinese proverb, it means that it is easy to find a deity to get help but it is difficult to sent him away after he gives help. In this novel, the character wants to quote it to say that special emissary Huang Chumin is difficult to be sent away after gain his help. This proverb itself is easy for the readers to understand, so the translator just used literal translation. In the example 7, "广济灾民, 超度亡灵" is what rulers do when they want to avoid disaster or when they have a need for god, in the novel, this sentence was said by the living Buddha to the chieftain, he suggested that the chieftain should do some good deeds to avoid disaster. From the translation version,

we can see that this sentence was translated according to its literal meaning. Because this sentence is relatively short and easy for the target readers to understand, the translator did not make extra compensation for this and only adopts the literal translation method.

2.2 Free Translation

Free translation refers to the translation according to the main idea of the original text, not to translate it according to its literal meaning. When literal translation cannot be adopted, the translator could use free translation.

Example 8

ST: 现在，他已经是一个出色的管家了。正是有了他出色的 打点，父亲和哥哥才会有时间出去寻欢作乐。(A Lai, 1998, p.66)

TT: Its recipient had since become an excellent steward, and it was precisely his outstanding skills that made it possible for my father and brother to go on their pleasure excursions. (Goldblatt, 2002, pp.73-74)

"打点" has several meanings in Chinese, in this sentence, it means that the steward can handle things well, the translator translated it into "outstanding skills", it is also expressed the author's meaning, so this kind of translation can help the target readers understand the word's real meaning.

Example 9

ST: 麦其土司无奈，从一个镶银嵌珠的箱子里取出清朝皇帝颁发的五品官印和一张地图，到中华民国四川省军政府告状去了。（A Lai, 1998, p.8)

TT: Left with no choice, Chieftain Maichi opened a case inlaid with silver and beads and took out a seal representing the highest official title conferred by the Qing emperor. With the seal and a map, he went to the provincial capital to file a complaint with the military government of Sichuan, under the control of the Republic of China. （Goldblatt, 2002, p.10)

"五品官印" is a kind of seal that represent the status and power of the owner in China before the collapse of Qing Dynasty. While in western country, they don't have such thing, so if the translator didn't explain it clearly to the target readers, they couldn't understand what it is. In this sentence's translation version, "五品官印" was translated into "a seal representing the highest official title" through free translation. That makes it easy for the target reader to understand its meaning.

2.3 Amplification

Amplification refers to represent the original schema with additional explanation within the text, before or after the translation of the cultural default. This kind of compensation method can't interrupt the target readers' reading.

Example10

ST: 母亲说：“是啊，早知如此，何必当初呢。”(A Lai, 1998, p.24)

TT: "Yes," Mother said: "He'd have saved himself a lot of trouble if he hadn't said your younger brother should be the chieftain back then." (Goldblatt, 2002, p.28)

"早知如此，何必当初" is also a Chinese proverb, meaning if you regret now, why did you do it at that time. But in this sentence's translation, if the translator doesn't show the exact reason, the target reader may be confused as they not know the reason why the character had said that. Thus, in the above translation version, the translator added "if he hadn't said your younger brother should be the chieftain back then" to explain the reason.

Example11

ST: 于是，亲自给活佛献茶，又去触活佛形而上的手。(A Lai, 1998, p.66)

TT: He brought tea for the Living Buddha, touching his forehead to the man's hand as an act of spiritual deference. (Howard Goldblatt, 2002, p.74)

In this sentence's translation version, "He" was added in the beginning of the sentence. This kind of translation is more consistent with English language habits, because Chinese often omit the subject, and English does not have this habit, so the translator should pay attention to this point in translation. In addition, "形而上" is a philosophic word, which is difficult for readers to understand, especially for foreign readers. So, the translator added some explanatory information to help the target readers.

2.4 Substitution

Substitution refers to replace the original items with the items in the target language. That is, it is a translation method to change words, phrases and sentences in the source text by those in the target language.

Example12

ST: 他们是土司派来跟在身后保护我的, 要看看有哪个下人敢犯上作乱, 在太岁头上动土。（A Lai, 1998, p.152）

TT: Assigned by the chieftain to protect me, they rushed up to see which slave had dared to rebel against authority and offend the powerful. (Goldblatt, 2002, p.173)

Example 13

ST: 母亲问我：“这小蹄子说什么？”（A Lai, 1998, p.2）

TT: Mother asked me, "What did the little tramp say?" (Goldblatt, 2002, p.4)

In the first example, "在太岁头上动土" is an old Chinese proverb that means to offend someone or something beyond one's power. However, there is no such expression in the target language, the translator use a phrase familiar to the target readers to help them to understand. In the second example, "小蹄子" often used to refers to the young woman of low status, especially the young maid, in this sentence, the chieftain's wife use it to call Dolma to show her angry to Dolma. If the translator translated it into "small hoof", the target readers may

don't understand what it means and they either can't learn Chinese cultural. So the translator substituted "小蹄子" as "the little tramp" to make it easier for the target reader to understand.

CONCLUSION

Based on Nida's cultural classification, this paper divides the cultural default into material cultural default, social cultural default and religious cultural default. Then, through the analysis of examples, this paper studies the three types of cultural default, and finds that the existence of cultural default may hinder the reading coherence of foreign language readers. Therefore, in the process of translation, translators need to make appropriate compensation for cultural default. In the translation of Red Poppies, Goldblatt mainly adopted literal translation, free translation and amplification to compensate for

cultural default. However, the study of cultural default and its translation compensation in this paper is confined to one novel, so it would inevitably have its own limitations. The author hope there will be more in-depth and comprehensive studies for cultural default and translation compensation in the future.

REFERENCES

A Lai (1998). *Chen'ai Luo Ding*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.

Goldblatt, H., & Lin, S. L-C. (2002). *Red poppies*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Goldblatt, H. (2002). *The writing Life*. Washington Post.

Newmark, P. (1988). *A textbook of translation*. Prentice Hall International (UK) Ltd..

Nida, E. A. (1993). *Language, culture and translation*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.