

## On the Translational Poetics for Museum Commentary: A Case Study of the Archaeological Excavations at the Royal Cemetery of Haihunhou Kingdom in the Han Dynasty

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### Abstract

Andre Lefevere believes that translators must adapt to the requirements of the times in the translation, so the language of the translation is inevitably manipulated by the dominant poetics. As a branch of applied text translation, museum commentary should not only convey the information of the cultural relics, but also introduce and disseminate Chinese history and culture to foreign tourists, whose language requires accuracy and vitality. Therefore, the linguistic level of museum commentary translation is bound to be manipulated by translation poetics. In the light of Lefevere's poetics of translation, the paper attempts to analyze the translation of Haihunhou museum commentary from three linguistic levels and finds out that the translated version's poetics have actually changed, including lexicon, syntax and rhetoric, to restore the characteristic language form of the original text. And it concludes domestication, literal translation and the translation methods frequently applied, with the desire for providing an innovative theoretical direction for the study of translation of museum commentary.

**Key words:** Translational poetics; Museum commentary; Haihunhou Kingdom

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### INTRODUCTION

With the continuous enhancement of China's economic strength and the frequent exchanges of Sino-Western cultures, the success of International Publicity Translation (Li & Zhang, 2009, p.77) not only has "a great impact on the international appeal and attraction of Chinese discourse" (Chen, 2013, p.100), but also gains a posture that more and more foreigners are willing to learn colorful Chinese culture through the achievements of International Publicity Translation. There also is a prominent feature in the translation of International Publicity, which is basically Chinese translation that a large number of information about China is translated from Chinese into foreign language. Especially, visiting the museum is a feasible and effective way for foreigners to know China. And compared with the introduction of tourist spot, the museum commentary has the purpose and function of information transmission and cultural communication. (Qiu, 2018, p.48). And Chan Alexandra points out that "To translate is to interpret, to explain in terms that can be easily understood and intellectually accessible. Translation requires more than documenting the material record and presenting it as it is. Archaeologists ask and encourage lay audiences to ask questions of the material record, questions about meaning. (Chan, 2011, p.169) So when museum is an important window for educational learning and cultural dissemination, the translation's language features of its commentary should be sufficiently diversified to carry rich information and a long history of the cultural relics. From another point of view, because applied translation refers to the translation of all non-

literary texts, of which the functions are predominantly informative (Han, 2005, p.48), the translation of museum commentary can be seen as applied translation. Then Andre Lefevere holds the view that translators must adapt to the requirements of the times in the translation, so the translation's language is inevitably manipulated by the dominant poetics. "The inventory component of the poetics of a literary system is not immediately subject to direct influence from the environment once the formative stage of the system is past. The functional component is more likely to undergo direct influence from outside the system". (Lefevere, 2004, p.34) Therefore, the linguistic level of museum commentary is bound to be manipulated by translational poetics. Nonetheless, compared with the translation study of foreign museums, that of domestic museums has actually flourished after the 1990s. Then, there have been so many theoretical researches on the analysis of museum commentary from the perspectives of Skopos Theory, Functional Theories of Translation and Relevance Theory. However, it should be noticed that Translational Poetics has hardly been applied as the theoretical tool of the research on the translation of museum commentary. Therefore, there is an innovative perspective to deeply explore the translation of museum commentary from the viewpoint of Translational Poetics. The paper chooses *The Archaeological Excavations at the Royal Cemetery of Haihunhou (Marquis of Haihun) State in the Han Dynasty*, a classic of archaeological book, to have a deep analysis from three linguistic levels, including lexicon, syntax and rhetoric. And it will induce some practical translation methods to provide actual research experience to those scholars or students who aim to translate museum commentary.

## 1. TRANSLATIONAL POETICS

The term of poetics dates back to Aristotle, the great ancient Greek philosopher and aesthete. In *Poetics*(1926), he had done a systemic research about theories of aesthetics and literature and then pointed out that poetics is a general name for style, theme and literary devices by discussing six elements—plot, diction, character, spectacle, son, thought g. In fact, Aristotle explored the function, the genre and nature of poetics instead of merely giving an actual definition of the term, which paved the way of poetics researching in the future. The first scholar of great significance to translation poetics is Henri Meschonnic, who reflects Aristotle's Poetics in his theory of translation poetics. According to his masterpiece *Pour la Poétique, Epistémologie de l'écriture, Poétique de la traduction*(1973), translation is not a kind of "replica", but a kind of creation. Moreover, literature translation has its particularity that entails the scope of poetics and cannot be thoroughly analyzed only by linguistic means, so it should be analyzed by poetics. Therefore, Meschonnic

regarded poetics as a more comprehensive and systematic theory than purely linguistic theory, which expands the field of its theoretical application. American scholar Willis Barnstone elaborated his unique viewpoint of translational poetics in his monograph *The Poetics of Translation* (1993), generalizing the four categories of poetics. Barnstone gave new connotations to poetics which developed in translation studies. In a sense, translational poetics gradually becomes alienated from Aristotle's poetics. Drawing upon the notions of polysystem and those brilliant scholars, André Lefevere took up poetics, as one manipulative constraint of Manipulation Theory, to highlight that both the inventory and functional components of the poetics are likely to influence the language characteristic of translated version. He broke the limitations of traditional poetics on translation study and linked translational poetics with cultural backgrounds.

Domestic study on translational poetics started from the 1990s. Yuan Xiaoyi and Xu Jun's *The Discussion of "Poetics of Translation"* (1995) is one of the most explicit essays on it in academia. They discussed Meschonnic's translation poetics and found it can promote the development of translation theories without the restriction of traditional linguistic, which offered a new angle for Chinese scholars to analyze translation. And Fei Xiaoping's book, *The Politics of Translation: Translation Studies and Cultural Studies* (2005), indicated that cultural studies became a premise when the study of poetics of translation was needed to be involved in. He also considered that the cultural translation poetics functions as a new approach in translation study and the Chinese translation theories. Yang Liu (2009) revealed the manipulation of poetic status, poetic attitude and classical literary forms on poetic rewriting in different cultural contexts as well as the crucial role of typical translational poetics in the evolution of literature, culture and society. She also found that translational poetics was a sort of cultural strategy which should be adopted by translators to make translation practice.

The paper will choose Lefevere's Translational Poetics of Manipulation Theory to make an analysis of classical museum commentary. Nevertheless, through searching for the relevant documents online and in the library, it is found that there are scanty academic researches on the translation of Hanhunhou commentary from the perspective of the translational poetics, which shows there is an innovative perspective to do a deep study. According to Lefevere's definition, no matter how much a translation work has processed, it is the poetics that actually takes the place when a translator has to consider a balance between the linguistics matter and poetical matter. (Lefevere, 2004, p.39) And the English translation of Haihunhou Museum Commentary adopted more authentic and detailed language to subtly adjust its linguistic expression, which made the translated one more acceptable in the dominant

poetics. Therefore, it will analyze *The Archaeological Excavations at the Royal Cemetery of Haihunhou (Marquis of Haihun) State in the Han Dynasty* from the perspective of translational poetics and induce specific translation methods from three linguistic levels.

## 2. THREE LINGUISTIC LEVELS OF TRANSLATIONAL POETICS IN THE TRANSLATION

Translational Poetics is composed of “two components: one is an inventory of literary devices, motifs, genres, prototypical characters and symbols; the other is a concept of what the role of literature is, or should be, in the social system as a whole.” (Lefevere, 2004, p.27) In one word, poetics is a language characteristic of specific literary system and form, including any linguistic units. So when literature is translated, its poetics has to change to that of the other language. However, what impacts will the translated literature manipulated by poetics make when the audience is a foreigner who is not familiar with Chinese culture? The following part of paper exemplifies the manipulation on three linguistic levels, which is the lexical level, the syntactical level and the rhetoric level, to concretely probe into the influence of Translational Poetics on the selection of translation strategies.

### 2.1 On Lexical Level

The first distinguishing language feature of the original text is Chinese idioms. For instance, four-character idioms and folk adages are widely used in Haihunhou Museum Commentary, which makes it more colorful and connotative. Facing the situation that foreign visitors cannot share the similar cultural backgrounds with Chinese, the translator chooses domestication to translate the Chinese idioms in order to deliver the information of the cultural relics.

**The original:** 一应俱全, 应有尽有 (Chi, 2016, p.68)

**Translation:** It is like an encyclopedia of Han relics. (p.69)

**Analysis:** The translator translates “一应俱全” to the concise word “an encyclopedia”, which could not only apply the simile to imply the diversified relics in Haihunhou Museum, but also create the cultural familiarity to foreigners. The flexible application of translation method also shows that the translator applies different translation methods under the guidance of Translational Poetics, because “a poetics, any poetics, is a historical variable: it is not absolute.” (Lefevere, 2004, p.35)

**The original:** 如果说“内行看门道, 外行看热闹”, 那我无疑是一个门外汉。(Chi, 2016, p.160)

**Translation:** I am amateur as the Chinese saying suggests that professionals know the ropes while amateurs just come along for the ride. (Chi, 2016, p.161)

**Analysis:** When dealing with the Chinese folk adage “内行看门道, 外行看热闹”, the translator notices the culture-loaded words “门道” and “热闹”, which keep the original charm but are hard to understand by foreigners if they are transliterated. Therefore, after have consulted the definitions of these words “门道” and “热闹”, which respectively means that a way or method to do something as well as the noisy sight, the translator translates this folk adage with the translation method of domestication. “Western countries do not have the hinterland of the mainland within such a vast national unity as China’s marine culture, which could only rely on cross-border trade and expedition. Therefore, the development of navigation has produced more navigation idioms in English than in Chinese, with more emphasis on the contribution of human development” (Qu, 2009, p.20). The translator chooses the specific navigation idiom “know the ropes” (Liu & Zhang, 2011, p.207) to imply someone who knows his job well, which produces the westerners’ familiarities with their navigation culture. And the translator uses an English fixed phrase “come along for the ride” to correspond to “看热闹”, which assists foreigners to better comprehend the meaning of the original text. This application of domestication not only creates antithesis for having the same function as the original text, but also implies that the translator actually makes appropriate translation methods with the influence of Translational Poetics.

**The original:** 鄱墩山古墓的发掘现场气势恢宏, 回字形结构的墓地蔚为壮观。(Chi, 2016, p.49)  
**Translation:** This site was found in an exceptional size. The tomb in shape of character “Hui” (回) was grandeur. (p.50)

**Analysis:** Because poetics is composed of two components: inventory component and functional component. The inventory component is known as various language units. So the way the translator deal with the translation of four-character idiom can partially reflect his translational poetics. The word “exceptional” means far beyond what is usual in magnitude or degree, which vividly shows the scale of the archaeological site. And the word “grandeur” is also a typical example of domestication to indicate the splendid shape of Haihunhou and the various relics, because of its meaning that is the quality of being magnificent or splendid or grand and its origin that is borrowed from old French “grandur” and Latin “grands”. These translations not only succeed in conveying the cultural information, but also refer to the foreigners’ expressions in daily life. So the choose of domestication actually proves the creativity of translational poetics. Meanwhile, there is an obvious example of foreignization in the second part, which is “the shape of character ‘Hui’”. However, “A changeable and changing poetics will also dictate which original works of literature are acceptable in a given system.” (Lefevere, 2004, p.36) Therefore, the translation does not cater to the

language expression of foreigners who are not familiar with the Chinese language and Chinese architecture from the perspective of Translation Poetics. And the author's American friends are used to describe this architecture with the word "square". Therefore, the author suggests that it be translated into "The excavation site was magnificent and grandeur, with cemetery congregation in the shape of double squares, one inside the other".

## 2.2 On Syntactical Level

The second brilliant feature is the adjustment of syntax in the translation of Haihunhou Museum Commentary from Translational Poetics. "Each dominant poetics freezes or certainly controls the dynamics of the system. It achieves this goal more easily in systems with undifferentiated patronage." (Lefevere, 2004, p.27) As far as syntax is concerned, the structure of Chinese is totally different from that of English, because English is a hypotactic language while Chinese belongs to paratactic language. In other words, long and complex sentences are preferred in English, which are not exactly the same with Chinese. Moreover, the translator has to make some adjustments in these structures when translating, especially in Museum Commentary, since foreign tourists would easily get confused and even distracted when the sentences are too short and broken. Besides, the passive sentence can be found frequently in English, which could bring flexible expressions and avoid the monotony of sentence patterns. The translator, of course, makes some proper changes in the English sentence structure, because there are almost active sentences in Chinese instead of passive ones.

**The original:** 彩绘漆盒: 漆盒箔银边, 中间镶嵌银质柿蒂纹样, 周边描金云气纹。(Chi, 2016, p.64)

**Translation:** Lacquered color box was plated with silver edge and inlaid with persimmon bast pattern surrounded by gold cloud pattern. (p.70)

**Analysis:** The original sentence consists of four short sentences, in which four verbs are employed to describe the subject "盒", since Chinese belongs to chronicle style (Lian, 2010, p.93). "The English sentence is extremely plastic. It can be enlarged, combined, adjusted with almost any degree of fitness to accommodate a writer's thought." (Eastman, 1984, p.184) In order to cater to English readers' habit of hypotactic language expression, the translator changes the verbs "漆" and "描" into past participles to be the subject's attributives, and then translates the two verbs "彩绘" and "镶嵌" into the past voice, simplifying the sentence patterns. Therefore, foreign readers can smoothly understand the translation and imagine the appearance of the beautiful lacquered color box.

**The original:** 棺周于衣, 椁周于棺, 土周于椁。(Chi, 2016, p.70)

**Translation:** Clothes on the body should be enclosed by the coffin within the chamber under the soil. (p.70)

**Analysis:** There are three short sentences in the

long sentence, which incredibly has three subjects and three objects, the former two objects being the last two subjects. "Subordination, the placing of certain elements in modifying roles, is a fundamental principle of English writing." (Crews, 1974, p.88) So it is the translator who is influenced by Translational Poetics who translates the two subjects "椁" and "土" into the place adverbials of the first subject "衣" to form the end-weight of the sentence (Lian, 2010, p.94). Therefore, subordination could be obviously seen in the target text, which makes the sentence structure clear to the foreigners and enables smooth understanding of them.

**The original:** 在海昏侯墓中, 发现了多块衣镜组件。(Chi, 2016, p.120)

**Translation:** Several components of a mirror were discovered in Haihunhou cemetery. (p.120)

**Analysis:** "When it is unnecessary or impossible to say the agent, the non-subject sentence or subject ellipsis sentence can be used to maintain the active voice in Chinese." (Lian, 2010, p.127) So when the condition comes about, there is actually no subject in the original sentence, which is hardly seen in English, because "our scientific and bureaucratic society is so addicted to the passive voice that you have to constantly alert yourself against its impersonal, drowsy pomp." (Baker, 1985, p.121) When the patient is the kernel of sentence, English usually use passive sentence to highlight it and convey the main idea. So the translator makes some flexible adjustments, according to the Translational Poetics, to cater for the expression of the foreign readers.

**The original:** 叫文杰过来照相, 同时用全站仪测量绘图。(Chi, 2016, p.156)

**Translation:** Wen Jie was invited to take photos of it and map it with total station instruments. (p.158)

**Analysis:** There is apparently another non-subject sentence in the original text. But because English focus on the regular sentence structure, the sentence cannot be correct without the subject. And when the subject is difficult to express or obvious in the preceding sentence, the passive voice or the other sentence patterns are applied to omit or imply the agent (Lian, 2010, p.127). Therefore, the translator adapts the English syntactic requirements of the dominant Translational Poetics to make adjustment to emphasize the patient "文杰", which can sort out the sentence structure and then let foreigners understand the meaning of the original.

## 2.3 On Rhetorical Level

"The commentary of cultural relics in Chinese museums tends to use rhetorical devices, such as simile and metaphor, to emphasize the relevant historical reality, the literariness of the text, which could highlight the vividness of language expression." (Meschonnic, 1973, p.110) Rhetoric is the use of different means of language expression in the process of speaking or writing, which also belongs to the branch of Translational Poetics, so that

the whole article is more vivid to read. "A changeable and changing poetics will also dictate which original works of literature are acceptable in a given system." (Lefevere, 2004, p.36) However, owing to the difference cultural information between English and Chinese, rhetoric has also become a major and difficult point in translation. Therefore, for producing a high-quality translation, the translator not only accurately conveys the cultural meaning of the original text, but also, to a large extent, transfers the original language characteristic to the target one.

**The original:** (海昏侯墓) 地处由东北向西南走向的五条小山脉中的中间一条山脉的顶端(鄱墩山), 东、西两面被两条较大山脉包住, 南面和西面有小河环绕, 像一朵含苞待放的花蕾。(Chi, 2016, p.139)

**Translation:** The site is on one peak of five small mountains stretching from northeast to southwest, which is like a blossoming bud surrounded by two big mountains at east and west and rivers at south and west. (p.142)

**Analysis:** "Simile is an expressed likeness. The most direct and simplest way of connoting an idea is by means of using similes. Simile is the neuter singular of the Latin adjective 'similes', meaning like." (Jiang & Zhong, 2008, p.49) The simile which is apparently in the original sentence is translated literally and completely into an English simile, because of the figurative word "像". "The functional component influence of Translational Poetics tends to find its most obvious expression in the themes written about in various stages of the system." (Lefevere, 2004, p.34) The choice of translating simile completely not only makes the translation vivid and easy for foreigners to understand, but also reproduce the tension beauty of the Chinese language.

**The original:** 如果说棺是墓主死后的纳身之所, 椁室则如同墓主在地下的阴宅。(Chi, 2016, p.70)

**Translation:** If coffin is a shelter for the tomb's occupant, chamber is like his house under the ground. (p.70)

**Analysis:** The definition of metaphor is "a word with some other meaning which is transferred either from species to genus, or from genus to species, or from one species to another, or used by analogy" (Aristotle, 1997, p.110) In one word, a metaphor's feature is that the subject and reference are very obvious while the indicator of resemblance is not apparent. Therefore, the translator retains the form of metaphor and translates "纳身之所" literally into "shelter", which implies the coffin is inferior to the chamber because the temporary habitation must be secondary to the cozy house. And Chinese simile also has the figurative word "如同", which is the same as the figurative one "is like" of English simile. So the translator literally translates the sentence to maintain the aesthetic of the original text. Because of metaphor and simile, the target text is so vivid that the intended readers can imagine the luxurious state of the Haihunhou's chamber. According to the guidance of Translational

Poetics, the translator identifies these figures of speech and represents them by literal translation to convey the original style as well as the meaning, which can be completely and readily accepted by the foreign readers because these figures of speech is not strange in their own language.

**The original:** 南昌汉代海昏侯国遗址是祖先留给我们的一份珍贵历史财富。

**Translation:** The ruins of Haihun which is qualified to be declared as has the condition of declaring the world heritage is a precious historical wealth left by our ancestors.

**Analysis:** There is an obvious figurative word "是" in the original text, which indicates that the ruin of Haihunhou is compared to a treasure. So after totally catching the admiration of the original text, the translator also applies the literal translation to enrich the imagination of foreign tourists, which still proves that the influence of Translational Poetics, to a large extent, can reproduce the beauty of the original text.

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## CONCLUSION

This paper has elaborately probed into *The Archaeological Excavations at the Royal Cemetery of Haihunhou(Marquis of Haihun) State in the Han Dynasty* from a new angle, Translational Poetics, and has demonstrated the manipulation of Translational Poetics from three linguistic levels, including lexicon, syntax and rhetoric. And it is also found that the domestication of four-character idioms and folk adages, the adjustment of syntax and the literal translation of rhetoric are the most commonly used translation strategy in these above examples, because the translator takes fully into account the particularity of Museum Commentary and the different cultural system of foreign tourists from the Translational Poetics. It is also proved that the manipulation of Translational Poetics actually helps the translator create a better translation version, which even could deliver these antiques' cultural connotations, help them image the excavation of the royal cemetery of Haihunhou and feel the emotional changes of the archeologists. Translational Poetics offers a new theoretical angle to do the relevant translation research, which could inspire more scholars to pay adequate attention to the improvement of translation of Museum Commentary.

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