

Translation of Culturally-Loaded Words With Chinese Characteristics

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Abstract

Translation is an intercultural activity which is closely related to language and culture, and translation is also one of the important ways to spread Chinese culture. This paper explores the translation of culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics from the perspective of cultural translation. It puts forward three English translation principles which are conciseness, appropriateness, faithfulness and smoothness. And then it points out the three translation methods including transliteration, literal translation, and liberal translation. It is not only helpful for English-speaking people to have a better understanding of the culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics but also beneficial to the export of Chinese culture to a certain extent.

Key words: Culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics; Translation principles; Translation methods

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INTRODUCTION

Now we are in an era of globalization and we are in a world of culture diversity. Inter-cultural communication is becoming increasingly extensive. People from different countries contact each other much more frequently than

ever before. Cultural exchange and cultural integration have come to every aspect of our life and to every participant. Multiculturalism has become a present-day phenomenon. Under such circumstances, Chinese government put forward the national cultural strategy, “ Chinese Culture ‘Going out’ ”, aiming to spread Chinese culture around the world to promote the image of China in the World. Translation is an essential tool for Chinese culture “ going out”, How to spread Chinese culture by way of translation is one of the tasks worthy to take. With the rapid development of China, more and more culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics come into existence. They are the words, phrases, and idioms that refer to specific things in Chinese culture and reflect particular Chinese culture, which have no full equivalents in English language and which are not easy to be accepted by English speaking people who know little about Chinese culture.

There have already been some researches about the translation of culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics from different perspectives, such as Venuti’s foreignization, the scoops theory, translation ethics, adaptation theory etc., which explore the different translation methods of culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics but few of them is from cultural translation perspective. Different from the former ones, this paper focuses on the analysis of the translation of culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics from the perspective of cultural translation, which is particularly helpful for the English-speaking people to understand both the culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics and Chinese culture. So it is quite meaningful to analyze this translation phenomenon in light of cultural perspective.

1. CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Translation studies was established as a distinct discipline in the 1970s and since then it has gained an increasingly important status in the academic circle. Intercultural

communication studies began in the 1960s and has made great achievements ever since the 1980s. With the rapid development of intercultural communication, scholars began to pay more and more attention to cultural factors which influence the communication between people who speak different languages. Translation was considered to be an intercultural activity involved with both languages and cultures. Mary Snell-Hornby (2001) called this phenomenon as “cultural turn”. So the focus of translation studies shifted from purely linguistic approach to cultural perspective. Translation studies was combined with cultural studies. Cultural translation studies started with a much broader view.

1.1 Language and Culture

According to the famous British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (1871) culture is “That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. Language is a tool used for communication, which carries people’s cultural background information. So language and culture are closely related, influencing and shaping each other.

Language is a part of culture and plays an important role in it. Language serves and reflects cultural needs. It serves two important cultural functions. It is the means of preserving culture and the medium of conveying culture to new generations. Language is strongly influenced and shaped by culture. Culture is reflected in language and it exists in the intellectual structure that a certain group of people use their language. Social institutions, value systems, world views, beliefs, human knowledge and experiences can be described and evaluated from language. Different cultures have different beliefs, values and norms about how to do. If one wants to understand what is said, he has to know the cultural background and life manner of the speaker. Good understanding of the target culture can help learners use the language more appropriately.

Cultures differ from one another and each culture is unique. As cultures are diverse, languages are diverse, too. Due to differences in cultures and differences in languages, difficulties often arise during the process of translation. So, translation is not just an activity on linguistic level but rather a process of culture transfer. To translate from one language to another, to some extent, is to translate from one culture to another. So we should pay much attention to the cultural aspects when we are engaged in the task of translation.

1.2 Translation and Culture

The American translation theorist Eugene A. Nida (2001:82) holds the view that biculturalism, for truly successful translating, is even more important than bilingualism, since words only have meanings in terms of the cultures in which they function.

Susan Bassnett(1990) believes that translation is the communication within culture or between cultures and

translation equivalence should be the cultural equivalence between the source text and the target text. Wang Zuoliang (1989) also thinks that translation is not only involved in linguistic issues, but also involved in cultural ones. So translation is not just a transfer of linguistic signs, but a process of cultural decoding and encoding. It is the information transfer between two languages and the cultural communication between two peoples. Translators have to deal with both the linguistic signs and the cultural aspects of the text.

Language is the carrier, container and mirror of culture. To fulfill inter-cultural communication it is natural for people to depend on language to carry out translation. Different countries are with different cultures, cultural consideration has to be bearded in mind before translating a text. So translation is a bilingual and bicultural activity.

Language, culture and translation are so closely related with one another that when translating culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics it is necessary to take Chinese culture into consideration. Appropriate English translation principles and translation methods have to be employed.

2. ENGLISH TRANSLATION PRINCIPLES AND TRANSLATION METHODS FOR CULTURALLY-LOADED WORDS WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

Chinese is different from English. Chinese is a kind of analytic language, in which there is no inflection while English is a kind of synthetic language that features inflection. As far as vocabulary is concerned, both languages possess plenty of words with cultural connotations. Because of different traditions and histories, different geographical environments, and different ways of thinking, they have different connotations, each has its own ways to be expressed and each has to be translated in different ways. The culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics cover various aspects of Chinese culture, such as religion, art, and philosophy and embody rich Chinese culture. They are related to particular Chinese culture, thus it is difficult to find equivalents in the English language. Better translation of them may make it easier for English language speakers to understand them and help to overcome the barriers for intercultural communication.

2.1 Translation Principles for Culturally-Loaded Words With Chinese Characteristics

Yan Fu(1898) put forward the famous translation criteria of faithfulness, communicability and elegance, which are the general principles for translators to follow. As for the translation of the culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics, the translation principle of conciseness, appropriateness, faithfulness and smoothness should be adhered to for the effect of intercultural communication.

2.1.1 Principle of Conciseness

The translation of culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics should be as concise as possible to provide Chinese cultural information in a simple manner. This kind of words refer to unique things in China and reflect particular Chinese culture which are unfamiliar to English speaking people. Too wordy translation may cause reading difficulty to English speaking people.

2.1.2 Principle of Appropriateness

Appropriateness should also be followed during the translation process of culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics. As the carriers of various Chinese cultures, culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics contain some specific Chinese cultural elements and therefore should be translated as appropriately as possible to reflect Chinese cultural feature.

2.1.3 Principle of Faithfulness and Smoothness

Faithfulness is the most important criteria. Faithfulness means the translation should be faithful to the original. On the premise of faithfulness, we should come along with the language naturally. The translation of culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics should first of all be faithful and at the same time be smooth.

2.2 Translation Methods for Culturally-Loaded Words With Chinese Characteristics

2.2.1 Transliteration

Transliteration means to translate according to the pronunciation of a word rather than its meaning. It is often used when translating people's names, places' names as well as some terms specific to Chinese culture. This method usually makes the translation sound vivid and familiar by maintaining its original pronunciation and Chinese culture flavor, which follows the principle of conciseness.

For example, "ma jiang"(麻将) is peculiar to Chinese only, for which usually four people are needed to play it. It has been very popular as an entertaining game in China. People play it for relaxation or for fun. Nowadays it is still welcome in China. To let English-speaking people understand it, "Majhong" is ok.

"Ke tou"(磕头) is a traditional Chinese etiquette. When celebrating the Chinese New Year, Chinese children often do this with their knees on the ground to the elder as a way of greeting. Besides, when someone is dead, people also do so as a way of mourning. "kowtoun" is its translation.

"Dama"(大妈) refers to the middle-aged women in China. The American media created the English word "Dama" to make fun of those middle-aged Chinese women, who bought a large quantity of gold and led to the fluctuation of the international gold price in April 2013.

"Tu hao(土豪)", originally refers to the despotic landlord who had a lot of money, land and property. Nowadays "Tuhao" is used to ridicule the mainland Chinese people who are rich but uncultured, not having

the corresponding good taste, manners to match their accumulated wealth.

The following are examples of this kind: place names such as "Shangrila" from "香格里拉", "Hutong" from "胡同"; names of food and drink such as "Zongzi" from "粽子", "Tofu" from "豆腐", "jiaozi" from "饺子"; "Maotai" from "茅台", "tea(from t'e (CH dial))" from "茶", "Dim Sum(from Cantonese)" from "点心", "ketchup (from fanqiejiang (CH dial))" from "番茄酱", and some other terms specific to Chinese culture such as "kang" from "炕", "yin yang" from "阴阳", "Fengshui" from "风水", "kung fu" from "功夫", "Laogai" from "劳改", "Shuanggui" from "双规", "Hukou" from "户口", "Hongbao" from "红包", "Guanxi" from "关系", "Chengguan" from "城管", "qipao (or cheongsam which is from Cantonese uhuo或或者)" from "旗袍", "Yuan" from "元", "renminbi" from "人民币", etc.

So far, all of the above transliterated words have been very well accepted by English speaking people. Transliteration may be employed if it works, which can better promote the communication between two cultures. Intercultural communication is becoming more and more extensive, English-speaking people may not feel strange to this kind of language phenomenon.

2.2.2 Literal Translation

Simply put it, literal translation is word-for-word translation. That is to translate something literally. The translator tries to keep both the original form and meaning of the source language. On one hand it is readable and natural for target audience, on the other hand it can also ensure the cultural richness of the source language and benefit the spread of the source culture. So, this translation method should be adopted firstly only if it works well, which is also in agreement with the first principle of conciseness.

For instance, pasting "chun lian"(春联) on the doors is a traditional Chinese custom to celebrate the Spring Festival. Some lucky Chinese characters are written on them to express people's good wishes for the New Year. Its English translation "New Year's couplet" is easy for English-speaking people to understand and better convey Chinese culture flavor.

"Zheng neng liang" (正能量), originally a term of physics, is now used to refer to all people and things which are positive, healthy, inspiring and hopeful in Chinese society. Translated literally, "positive energy" is in accordance with "正能量" and it is acceptable for English speakers.

"Zhong guo meng"(中国梦) is put forward by Chinese President Xi Jinping. Its connotation is that the country is rich and powerful and the nation is rejuvenating and people are happy. "Chinese dream" is the best version for "中国梦", which is loyal to not only the source language but also the target language, and source readers as well as target readers.

"APEC lan" (APEC蓝) was used to describe the air condition of Beijing from November 7, 2014 to November

12, 2014 during which the APEC Conference was held in Beijing. At that time the air was fresh and the sky was blue. The English version of it is “APEC blue”, which keeps the name of the conference on one hand and shows the environmental feature of that period on the other.

“Xin chang tai” (新常态) refers to the newly emerging Chinese economic status. Nowadays Chinese economy is in a shifting stage and at middle-developing speed, the economic structure is in the process of option, facing more challenge. In English “New Normal” refers to the slow and painful process of Western economic recovery after the world’s financial crisis of 2008, in which the economy was characterized as low-growth speed, high unemployment rate and high debt. Thus, “xin chang tai” (新常态) can be translated into “new normal”.

“Huo de gan” (获得感) is translated into “sense of gain”, which literally refers to the feeling that someone has obtained something that is beneficial.

At the Tenth Meeting of the Leading Group for Overall Deepening Reform of the Central Government held on February 27, 2015, General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed that we should make more Chinese people have the sense of gain (获得感). It is used here to emphasize that the Chinese government will do more to ensure that the bonus of reform and development could benefit all Chinese people and enhance their well-being. People live a happy life, being satisfied with their work and salary, fresh air and unpolluted environment. Since then it is mentioned frequently. The English translation “sense of gain” matches the Chinese “huo de gan” (获得感).

“Yi dai yi lu”(一带一路) aims to develop the economic and cooperative partnership with the countries along the ancient silk road. China has been well known for its silk road since ancient times because it is unique in the world. “one belt and one road” for “一带一路” is readable for English-speaking people.

The following Chinese vocabulary with cultural connotations are also suitable for this kind of translation method. “three character primer” for “三字经”, the four stationary treasures of the Chinese study—a writing brush, an ink stick, an ink stone and paper” for “文房四宝”, “rhythmical image” for “韵律感”, “rhyme-scheme” for “押韵格式”, “firecracker” for “爆竹”, “(traditional) New Year pictures” for “年画”, “New Year gift-money” for “压岁钱”, “dragon dance” for “舞龙”, “lion dance” for “舞狮”, “the Spring Festival travel” for “春运”, “the Spring Festival” for “春节”, “the Mid-autumn Festival” for “中秋节”, “the Double-ninth Day” for “重阳节”, “temple fair” for “庙会”, “the Double-seventh Day” for “七夕节”, “Chinese paper-cut” for “剪纸”, “Peking Opera” for “京剧”, “facial makeup in Beijing Opera” for “京剧脸谱”, “Chinese knot” for “中国结”, “Chinese painting” for “中国画”, “Chinese cuisine” for “中国菜”, “Chinese calligraphy” for “中国书法”, “Chinese embroidery” for “中国刺绣”, “solar calendar” for “阳历”, “lunar calendar” for “阴历”, “leap year” for “闰年”, “red

guard” for “红卫兵”, “great leap forward” for “大跃进”, “the Gang of Four” for “四人帮”, “public-private joint management” for “公私合营”, “iron rice bowl” for “铁饭碗”, “Vegetable Basket Project” for “菜篮子工程”, “image projects” for “形象工程”, “hope project” for “希望工程”, “material civilization” for “物质文明”, “harmonious society” for “和谐社会”, “Scientific Outlook on Development” for “科学发展观”, “seeking commonground while shelving differences” for “求同存异”, “one country, two systems” for “一国两制”, “three represents” for “三个代表”, “the four cardinal principles” for “四项基本原则”, “Two Centenary Goals” for “两个一百年”奋斗目标, “Four-Pronged Comprehensive Strategy” for “四个全面”战略布局, “Online shopping” for “网购”, “Shared bicycle” for “共享单车”, “social morality” for “公德”, “naked officials” for “裸官”, “anti-corruption” for “反腐”。

All of the above culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics are translated literally into its corresponding English words. The advantages of this translation method lie in that it can maintain the original form and meaning of the source text in the target language so it is easy for target readers to understand it and also conducive for the spread of source culture.

2.2.3 Liberal Translation

Liberal translation is sense-for-sense translation. The translator seeks to express the original meaning, ignoring the original form to keep the target language smoothly. It is based on the principle of faithfulness and smoothness. Therefore, this translation method should be taken into consideration when it is difficult to find word equivalents in the target language.

For example, “qing ming jie(清明节)” is one of the traditional Chinese festivals, which is set on April 5. On that day Chinese people sweep the tombs in memory of those who are dead. The appropriate translation for “清明节” is “the Tomb-sweeping Day”. In this way, the Chinese cultural flavor is kept and the connotative meaning is also known by the Westerners. Otherwise if it is translated literally, they still have difficulty in understanding it.

“Gei li(给力)”, literally meaning “giving strength”, even appeared on the front page of *People’s Daily* on November 10, 2010 and then accepted by *New York Times*. It is translated into “great/brilliant /awesome/ cool” to imply that something is effective and helpful.

“Ni xi”(逆袭) in Chinese means to “counter-attack successfully in adversity”. It is used to highlight the indomitable spirit. So the better English translation of it is “counter-attack under unfavorable circumstance”, which can fully reflect its Chinese flavour and cater to the acceptance of foreigners.

Recently “you ni”(油腻) in Chinese is used to describe the middle-aged man featuring the character of being overweight, greasy, dirty and failing to maintain personal hygiene. Therefore, “unpleasantly greasy” is the better translation for it.

“Ying gu tou” (硬骨头) in Chinese may be translated into “tough issue” when problems or tasks met with are of extreme difficulty and hard to deal with.

“you quan bu ke ren xing” (有权不可任性) is translated into “Power is not to be used arbitrarily.” In China some of the government officials make full use of their power to do something unlawful. Premier Li Keqiang proposed that Power is not to be used arbitrarily to warn those government officials to stop their behaviour.

Other examples are: “butler” for “guanjia” (管家), “slave” for “nubi” (奴婢), “cheongsam” for “qipao” (旗袍), “traditional Chinese medicine” for “zhongyao” (中药), “china” for “ciqi” (瓷器), “chopsticks” for “kuaizi” (筷子), “communal pot” for “daguofan” (大锅饭), “socialist China” for “hongsezhongguo” (红色中国), “Porn – Purging Campaign” for “saohuang” (扫黄), “shoddy cotton” for “heixinmian” (黑心棉), “sweet sticky rice dumplings” for “yuanxiao” (元宵), “festival lantern” for “huadeng” (花灯), “Chinese tunic suit” for “zhongshanzhuang” (中山装), “whorehouse” for “qinglou” (青楼), “Check, please! or Bill, please!” for “mandan” (埋单), “online retailer” for “dianshang” (电商), “wechat Business” for “weishang” (微商), “high speed train” for “gaotie” (高铁), “alipay” for “zhifubao” (支付宝), “bullet train” for “dongche” (动车), “new-rich” for “baofahu” (爆发户), “No Z turn, avoid self-inflicted setback” for “buzheteng” (不折腾).

All of the above culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics are with strong Chinese culture flavor. It is hard to find their English equivalents. Under such circumstances it's better to translate them according to meaning so that English speakers could understand them better.

IMPLICATIONS

Connotations vary from culture to culture. Serious misunderstandings may occur during the process of intercultural communication if they are ignored. Therefore it is important for translators to pay much attention to it. They should bear in mind that translation is a kind of inter-cultural activity, which involves not only language but also culture. The translation should be equivalent in not only meanings and emotion but also function and effects. So translators need first of all to very well acquaint themselves with not only source language and target language, but also native culture and foreign cultures. They should be bilingual and bicultural, if not multicultural. In addition, they should also compare the target culture with the source culture constantly to find out the differences between them, which might be the obstacles for translation. What's more, they should also be armed with professional knowledge and translation skills. Only doing so can they accomplish the translation of culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics?

CONCLUSION

Culturally-loaded words with Chinese characteristics are symbols of Chinese culture. During the process of Chinese-English translation of them, the translation methods such as transliteration, literal translation and liberal translation may be employed accordingly. If transliteration and literal translation are effective enough to make the target text understandable to target readers, translators should firstly apply these two translation methods for they can keep the cultural information of the source language, which can help target readers know more about the source culture. However, if transliteration and literal translation fail to make the target text acceptable to target readers, translators may resort to other methods such as liberal translation to make sure the readability of target texts. Liberal translation may lead to the loss of cultural image in source texts, but it can keep the meaning of the lost cultural image, which is another level of cultural spread. Whatever translation methods are employed, the translation principles of conciseness, appropriateness, faithfulness and smoothness should be followed.

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