

## On the English Version of *Wolf Totem* From the Skopos Theory

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### Abstract

Lang Tuteng has led a heat wave to readers in China, and has been sold more than 1,000,000 books in a year. In 2008, its English version was released. The best-selling of *Wolf Totem* has turned out to be a national phenomenon, which has caused widespread academic concern. Scholars try to explore and explain its artistic attraction from different perspectives such as literature, eco-criticism, history, society and so on. So for its English version, some scholars tend to analyze it through different methods, as equivalence theory, subjectivity manipulation theory. Most of them, however, were confined to using a single aspect to interpret the translator's approach rather than explaining it as a version influenced functional theory. By analyzing the English version of *Wolf Totem* from different angles, the author tends to discover some inspiration and introspection for the overseas transmission of Chinese literature.

**Key words:** Translation; Wolf totem; Skopos; Translation theory; Culture

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### INTRODUCTION

Lang Tuteng, a semi-autobiographical and epic novel, takes its author Jiang Rong (Lü Jiamin), a novelist who writes under the pen name, 30 years to complete. He is the

winner of the inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize in 2007 and the book won the prize among fierce competition with works from throughout Asia. The book records his personal experiences on the grasslands of China's border region and shows great concerns about humanity and people's homeland and echoes people's soul. As a fiction concerning humanity and nature, Lang Tuteng has created a sensation in China and has been a best seller in the country since 2004. The novel's English version has been paid much attention when it came to press because it was translated by Howard Goldblatt, the well-known American sinologist and translator. After its publication in 2008, the circulation of *Wolf Totem* is record-breaking in the sales of translated Chinese novels. Undoubtedly, the success of *Wolf Totem* in Western countries is mainly ascribable to the translator's selection of translation strategies so it is worthwhile to pay attention to and study both its Chinese version and English version.

After 2009, some studies about Lang Tuteng and its English version have been carried out from the perspectives of Reception Theory, Deconstruction Theory, and Translator's Subjectivity and other theories. However, few scholars paid attention to the Skopos theory, therefore, this paper concerns the skopos theory and intends to provide some suggestions for adopting the approach in translation. The author wants to opt for modern fiction, which is closer and more connected to the people and more importantly which is rarely studied by other scholars.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1 The Development of Skopos Theory

In this part, the author tries to set up a theoretical foundation for the analysis of translation strategies in Lang Tuteng from the perspective of Skopos theory. First of all, let us study the three rules of the translation theory.

The core of functionalist translation is the “skopos rule”, which means that the practice of translation is defined by a given design of a text. In other words, the translator should know the design in a particular translation context and then decide the translation methods according to the purpose. Fidelity rule is also called “inter-textual coherence”, which emphasizes that the target text should be faithful to the source text. Its form is determined by the translator’s understanding of the source text and the purpose of translation. Coherence rule means that the translation should be readable and acceptable. It clearly illustrates that a good translation should achieve cultural coherence between source text and target text and the translation should be acceptable by the readers in a sense.

Now, the development of the skopos theory should be analyzed. Before the advent of Skopos theory, translation studies were centered around the core idea of the linguistic school of translation studies—equivalence. Various equivalence theories based on linguistic theory were advanced, but they were merely new combinations of various forms of equivalence. Skopos is a core idea in functional translation theory of Germany. It is essential that translators take a historical overview of the creation of Skopos theory. Of course, since Skopos theory did not suddenly appear, a brief description of early functionalist views of translation is needed to sketch the situation from which the Skopos theory emerged.

Skopos theory is the core idea of German functionalist translation theory, which is put forward by the German linguist—Hans Vermeer. As early as 1971 Katharina Reiss, a pioneer of German school, introduced a functional approach into her translation research. Her *Possibilities and Limits in Translation Criticism* may be regarded as the chrysalis of functionalist translation theory. Based on the connection of linguistic function, text style and translation strategy, she sets up a translation criticism mode, with the functional equivalence between the source and text as a basis. Consequently, she puts forward the rudiments of a functional approach of translation.

Hans J. Vermeer, one of Katharina Reiss’s students, made great contributions in trying to bridge the gap between theory and practice. His effort in breaking with linguistic translation theory is clearly shown in his *Framework Translation Theory*. Vermeer’s viewpoint is that a translation theory cannot draw on linguistic theory alone. Vermeer considers the translation to be a type of human action. In accordance with action theory, Vermeer defines translation as a form of translation action based on a source text, which is intentional, purposeful behavior that takes place in a given situation. That is why Vermeer calls his theory Skopos theory, a theory of purposeful action. The status of the source text is clearly much lower in Skopos theory than in equivalence-based theories. In Vermeer’s opinion, the translation strategies and techniques are defined by the purpose of translation.

After Vermeer, Justa Holz-Manttari, a German translation scholar, goes one step further than Vermeer. Her translation theory is based on the principles of action theory. In Holz-Manttari’s model, translation is defined as a complex action, which is designed to achieve a particular purpose. Holz-Manttari places special emphasis on the participants (initiator, translator, user, message receiver) and the situational conditions (time, place, medium) in which their activities take place. According to Justa’s theory, performance refers to the process of information transmission in order to realize the cross-cultural and cross-language transformation (Munday, 2001). She further developed the Skopos Theory.

Christiane Nord, professor of Polytechnic of Magdeburg, Germany, is one of the advocators of Skopos theory. She is the initiator who systematically elaborated different kinds of ideas of functionalist translation theory in English. Her *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained* is regarded as a new contribution to the development of functionalist theory. The rule of “function plus loyalty” was mentioned by Nord, it requires the translator to appropriately balance the relationship between source and target text. Nord’s principle makes a contribute to the development of Skopos Theory.

According to Skopos theory, there are three possible kinds of purpose in the field of translation: the general purpose aimed at by the translator in the translation process (perhaps “to earn a living”), the communicative purpose aimed by the target text in the target situation (perhaps to “instruct the readers”) and the purpose aimed at by a particular translation strategy or procedure (Nord, 2001). The analysis of translation strategies in this paper is undertaken from the perspective of Skopos theory.

## 1.2 The Core of Skopos Theory

Skopos is the Greek word for “aim” or “purpose”. In Skopos theory, it indicates the purpose of translation and the act of translating action. In Skopos theory, translation is regarded as a type of human action, and has its own purpose. Every human behavior has its purpose, so does the translation. Generally speaking, the main principle in the process of translation is the Skopos of overall translations acts; there are three kinds of Skopos in the process of translation as we have mentioned above, the translator’s general purpose; the communicative purpose and the purpose by a particular translation strategy (Nord, 2001). Skopos in the theory means the communicative purpose in the target language. There is a given purpose in every text and the translation of the text should serve this purpose. The Skopos rule can be understood as follows: translate in a way that enables the translated message in a way that can be used by the people who want to use it in the way they want (Vermeer, 2001).

The receptor is the most important factor that influences the Skopos of the translated text and the

purpose of a translation is to meet the needs of a certain group of target language readers. A client gives the purpose of a translation. When he is incompetent to decide the Skopos of the translation, the translator should take on the task. The client and translator should negotiate with each other when the client is vague about what kind of text is suitable in the translation process. Competent translators always infer the purpose from the translational situation itself.

It can be seen that Skopos theory puts emphasis on the purpose of translation, thus the place of source text is obviously not as important as that in traditional theories. Skopos theory attaches its importance on the target language instead of the source language. This is a great shift in the history of translation theory studies. According to Skopos theory, translation process should find the purpose of the translation first, then find a proper translation method to match the source text (Venuti, 1995).

### 1.3 The Translational Purpose of *Wolf Totem*

The cross-culture factor will be taken into consideration in the translation of literature. Jiang Rong is an ordinary scholar but with rich experience of living in Mongolian. He wrote his personal experiences into the work. *Wolf Totem* presented the different rich and varied living style and tradition of ethnic minority as well as an important relationship among different species in nature that caused the translator's strong wish to spread the Chinese culture. Goldblatt expressed that he wanted to introduce more Chinese literatures to westerners. However, due to the cultural barrier, American readers prefer to read a book written by a westerner. In addition, the social environment needs communication of the two cultures. China has a long history over five thousand years and splendid culture. Since China's "reform and opening-up policy" implemented, the charming of Chinese culture has absorbed thousands of foreigners to understand and research. Goldblatt holds that China's influence is becoming apparent on literature and movie because of the Olympic Games in 2008 and the World Exposition in 2010. It is a good chance to introduce Chinese culture to the westerners and other English speakers for China.

According to Goldblatt, American readers prefer to the exotic flavor of Chinese literatures. Their curiosity is on behalf of curiosity of the entire western world to China. Westerners outside China would like to know China. The most direct way is to read. In most cases, the meaning of wolf represents cunning, fierce and cruel, skeptical and a kind of gregarious animal. However, in *Wolf Totem*, grassland wolf represents valiant spirit. The author of the original text gives wolfs more connotations. Besides cunning, fierce and cruel, the wolf also represents intelligent and cunning, brave, ambitious and patient. The spirit of the wolf is a concrete manifestation of vitality. The subject of *Wolf Totem* is excellent, and people from

different countries have different view of wolf. They are eager to find out what the unique grassland wolf is. Therefore, *Wolf Totem* is warmly welcome by foreign readers after its publication in 2008. Goldblatt thinks that, except few receivers, such as Chinese students who want to improve their English, most of the TT receivers are American and other English-speakers in the world. In the different background, they love coherent stories and don't like too many obscure words when reading the text. In the past, Americans liked the serious literatures. At present, however, they tend to choose a reader-friendly novel without much difficult phrases. Therefore, considering the receivers' needs, background knowledge and reading practice, the translator has to get help from domestication to increase the readability of the translation. Vermeer once stated that any text is just a kind of information from which each receiver selects the items they find interesting and important (Nord, 2001). Goldblatt once said that *Wolf Totem* was catering for TT receivers' reading habit because of its expression of stories and narrative structure.

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## 2. LANG TUTENG'S TRANSLATIONAL PURPOSE AND THE TRANSLATION STRATEGIES

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### 2.1 Translator's Brief Induction

Generally speaking, the translator must meet at least three demands to handle the source text, Lang Tuteng. First, he/she must be a master of the English language; secondly, he/she must have the ability to understand Chinese, sometimes ancient Chinese; thirdly, he/she should grasp the cultural connotations and transfer them in English. Goldblatt, born in 1939, is an American. As a student, he had no interest in studying at all. So after graduation from a common state-owned college, he could not find a job and had to serve in the army. In 1961, the American Navy assigned him to Taiwan where he had nothing to do and thus began to learn Chinese there under the help of a Chinese soldier. Since then he found himself talented in learning language especially Chinese. After his service in the army, he did not hurry to go back to the US and continued learning Chinese in Taiwan Normal University. Later, he went back because of his father's illness. Once again he could not find a job for lack of any practical skills. Therefore, following the advice of one of his teachers, he furthered his study as a postgraduate student and majored in Chinese in Los Angeles State University where he thoroughly fell in love with Chinese literature, especially those of Xiao Hong, a young Taiwanese female writer. After getting his master's degree, he continued to obtain a doctor's degree in Indiana University and majored in Chinese classic novel, poetic drama in the Yuan Dynasty and works by Lu Xun and other modern

and contemporary Chinese writers. He graduated with honor by translating Xiao Hong's *Tales of Hulan River* which began his life-long career of translating Chinese literary works. Besides competence in two languages, enthusiasm for translating unique Chinese literature is also necessary for such a difficult task. But this, to Goldblatt, is not a problem because he loves the cause of translation, especially the cause of translating contemporary Chinese literature into English. He enjoys a lot of the thorough pleasure of putting complex Chinese to English.

## 2.2 Translational Purpose

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difficult phrases. Therefore, considering the receivers' needs, previous knowledge and reading practice, the translator has to get help from domestication to increase the readability of the translation. Just as Vermeer states, any text is just a kind of information from which each reader chooses the items he/she finds interesting (Nord, 2001) Goldblatt once said that *Wolf Totem* was catering for TT receivers' reading habit because of its expression of stories and narrative structure.

## 3. CASE STUDY OF TRANSLATION STRATEGY OF WOLF TOTEM

In this chapter, the author will analyze *Wolf Totem* from culture elements under basic rules of Skopos theory.

### 3.1 The Concept of Culture

Culture can be found in its presence everywhere in the society, exerting tremendous influence in a substantial way. Thus scholars conclude that every aspect of human life is influenced and touched by culture due to its omnipresent characteristic. At the same time, the definitions of culture have never been achieved due to culture's all-pervasive quality. That is why over 160 definitions of culture found since 1952 in the anthropology literature. At the same time, a lot of new definitions have come into existence ever since. All the definitions include the patterns of behavior and thought, artifacts and so on.

Though we have never reached a particular definition of culture, there would have been multitude of agreements with regard to the main qualities of culture. Anthropologically, the cultural definitions agree on the following qualities.

#### 3.1.1 Culture Is Commonly Shared

If a man thinks or does a certain thing, his thought and action will represent his personal habit. Similarly, the pattern of culture does so. That is to say, if we consider a thought or action culturally, it must be shared by a large number of people instead of the individuals.

#### 3.1.2 Culture Is Learned

In spite of that, not all the things shared by groups of people can be called culture. For example, the typical complexion is not cultural. Culture must be learned and shared if we want to define it.

#### 3.1.3 Culture Is Integrated

Every aspect of culture is tangled up with the other aspects of culture—it functions as a whole. If one part of the culture is touched, everything else of culture will be influenced and touched. For instance, family size and spiritual outlook will be influenced by the material values in a culture.

#### 3.1.4 Culture Is Based on Symbols

Language is a kind of symbol, which includes a lot of entities and events that cannot be caught alone. This kind

of thinking has been proved by many anthropologists who think that language is the carrier of culture. To be more specific, a culture without language is unbelievable.

### 3.2 The Classification of Culture

Culture can be divided into the following four sub-systems according to an anthropological standard.

- (a) Techno-economic system: Techno-economic System: ecology, means of production, exchange and distribution of goods, crafts, technology and science and artifacts.
- (b) Social System: social classes and groups, kinship system, politics and law, education, sports and entertainment, customs and general history.
- (c) Linguistic System: phonology and graphemes, morphology and syntax and pragmatics.
- (d) Ideational System: cosmology, religion, magic and witchcraft, folklore, artistic creations as images, values, cognitive focus and thinking patterns, and ideology (Wills, 2004).

In the above-mentioned four sub-systems, the ingredients are varied from culture to culture. So when translators want to solve the cultural gap between the source language and target language, some misreading will arise accordingly.

According to the categories given by the scholars and characteristics of culture in *Wolf Totem*, the author classifies the culture into four categories: (1) the ecological cultural information, (2) material cultural information, (3) social cultural information, (4) thought, speech and gestures. These four categories can fully cover the special culture in *Wolf Totem*.

In the process of transferring language, the translator always meets various barriers that are caused by difference of language culture. Some of the obstacles are insuperable. Just as Nord said, the source-text situation is so different from the target-text situation that there is no way of establishing a direct link between the source-text author and the target-text readers' (Nord, 2001, P.126). In such a case, in order to deal with these problems the translator should take the following factors as consideration, the expressive habits of target language, the TT reader's understanding ability and receptivity. Domestication is one of translational strategies. Its aim is to change some facets of a source language to achieve fluent sense of the target text. In this way, the readability and comprehensibility of the translation are increased. As one of two main strategies, domestication builds a bridge for identical meaning between the source text and the target text. In *Wolf Totem*, domestication is employed by the translator to achieve two purposes: to cater to the reading habit of TT readers and to build a bridge for communicating between two cultures. Usually, domestication includes some skills, such as free translation approach, free

translation with annotation, substitution and substitution plus annotation.

For example:

(1) Ge si mai cong bao li na chu da ban pen shou ba rou (p. 9)

Gasmai carried a big pot of meat outside to reward Bar and the other dogs..

(2) ta tao chu lao bing, shou ba rou...(p.90)

He took out some flat bread, some fatty meat, and two chunks of curds.

Shou ba rou, the boiled mutton with bone, is Mongolian traditional food for guests in their daily lives. Mongols eat them with hands or Mongolian knives. The taste of meat is delicious and easy to digest. "shou ba rou" is translated into "meat" and "some fatty meat" respectively. The translator employed free translation to meet the TT readers' reading habit.

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## CONCLUSION

This paper applies Skopos theory to systematically analyze the translation strategy employed in process of translating *Wolf Totem*. In this part, the author draws some conclusion as the followings and put forward some limitations and suggestions of this research. According to Skopos theory, different Skopos decides the choice of different translation strategies. In *Wolf Totem*, based on the theory, the translator applies domestication strategy and foreignization strategy to reproduce the source text. In order to introduce the Chinese culture to the target language readers and satisfy their expectation of the Chinese culture, the translator mainly employs foreignization strategy when he translates the information about the unique phenomenon on the Chinese culture. In order to cater for the target text receivers' reading practice, the translator mainly adopts domestication strategy to faithfully convey the thoughts and effect of the source text and increase the readability and acceptability of the target text. In the perspective of Skopos theory, the application of the domestication strategy combined with the foreignization strategy achieves the expected Skopos.

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