

Translation of Culture-Specific Items in *Honglouloumeng* From Functionalist Perspective

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Abstract

Honglouloumeng is a great classical Chinese novel written in the mid-eighteenth century, which is also regarded as one of the greatest novels in the world by *Encyclopedia Britannica*. It not only presents the corruption and decadence of the feudal ruling class and points out its inevitable doom, but also gives praise to the democratic spirit. Apart from this, it displays Chinese culture so comprehensively that it is called the encyclopedia of Chinese traditional culture. The novel is full of culture-specific items whose translation is a great challenge to translators. Functionalist translation theory breaks the fetters of linguistic perspective, providing a new angle to translation. Based on Nida's classification of culture, this paper will discuss the applicability of functionalist translation theory to literary translation, with the comparison of the two English versions- *The Story of the Stone* translated by David Hawkes, a British sinologist and translator, together with John Minford and *A Dream of Red Mansions* by Yang Hsien-yi, a famous Chinese translator, and Gladys Yang.

Key words: Translation; Culture-specific items; *Honglouloumeng*; Functionalist perspective

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INTRODUCTION

As the top one of the four great classical Chinese novels, *Honglouloumeng* was written by Cao Xueqin and Gao E in the mid-eighteenth century. It describes various aspects of the feudal society in Late Qing Dynasty so vividly and comprehensively that it is regarded as the mirror of that period in Chinese history and it reveals that feudalism is doomed to decay. Furthermore, the language of the novel has a high aesthetic value. It is such a treasure for us to study classical literature, feudal society and traditional culture in China that there is the tendency of "redology" among scholars. Even among western readers, *Honglouloumeng* is still the most popular classical Chinese novel. The earliest translation began in 1830 and for almost two centuries the study about it and its translation has been continuing. Until now, there are 60 translated versions that include 23 languages, among which there are 11 English versions. One of the two famous English versions is translated by David Hawkes, who is a British sinologist and translator, together with his student, son-in-law John Minford, and the other is translated by Yang Hsien-yi, who is a well-known Chinese translator, and his British wife Gladys Yang.

As the encyclopedia of the late feudal society of China, *Honglouloumeng* contains many culture-specific items. Because of the different cultures, transmitting the information that contains Chinese culture is a great challenge. Thus, to help western readers understand Chinese culture, it is necessary to study its translation.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Historical Overview

Just as Nord (2001, p.4) said, "functionalism didn't suddenly appear overnight". Actually, it has a long history. Literary and Bible translators in history also translated for different purposes. Cicero, the first theorist in western

translation history, was aware that different translation strategies serve different translation purposes and the order or wording can be altered out of necessity. Jerome, best known for his translation of most of the Bible into Latin, also realized the difference between literary and Bible translation, holding the view that in some cases text should be adjusted to the needs and expectations of the target reader.

Eugene Nida put forward “dynamic equivalence” in 1969 and then in 1986 he revised it into “functional equivalence”. Moreover, Nida also pays attention to the receptors’ response. However, the equivalence theory still emphasizes the linguistic aspect. He cannot escape the influence of linguistics yet. Of course, Nida’s linguistic tendency has the historical reason. In the 1950s and 1960s, linguistics was so popular that many translation theorists studied translation from the linguistic perspective. In this situation, a new theory was called for. Thus, the appearance of functionalist translation theory answers the call of the times.

1.2 Functionalist Translation Theory

In the 1970s, functionalist translation theory was put forward by German scholars. They clearly expound that the problem cannot be solved only with linguistics. Functionalist approaches regard translation as an intentional communicative action, which breaks the tradition that regards the text as the center and offers a new perspective to translation studies. Translators show more concern for the target reader and function of the target text. Thus, it widens the study scope of translation theory and gives translation more connotations.

There are four representatives of the “German School” of functionalist translation theory. The first one is Katherine Reiss. She is the founder of functionalist translation theory, who puts forward text typology, holding that different translation strategies should be used in different text types. And her student, Hans J. Vermeer founds the core theory of functionalist translation theory: skopos theory, a theory of purposeful action. In German, skopos means “purpose”. According to Vermeer, the most significant rule for translation is the “skopos rule”, that is, a translational action is determined by its skopos. Next is intratextual coherence, that is, the target reader should understand the text. And the third one is intertextual coherence, which can also be named fidelity, exists between the source and the target text. Next representative is Justa Holz-Mänttari, who develops functionalist translation theory and puts forward the theory of translational action. The last one is Christiane Nord. It is Nord who first systematically summarizes functionalist translation theory in English for the first time. And she adds loyalty principle to functionalist translation theory, which means translators bear responsibility towards not only the source but also the target side (Nord, 2001, p.125).

2. THE APPLICABILITY OF FUNCTIONALIST APPROCHES TO LITERARY TRANSLAITON

In Nord’s (2001, p.90) *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, she points out the shortcomings of equivalence theory in literary translation: The openness specific to literary text makes the equivalence requirement not only impossible to meet but also rather undesirable. She proves the applicability of functionalist translation theory of literary translation and puts forward four suggestions on literary translation from functionalist perspective. She claims that translation methods are determined by the function. Before translation, translators should make an analysis of the source text to determine whether the animation of the style of the source text can fulfill the function and achieve the effect (Ibid., pp.92-93).

Besides, functionalist approaches put much emphasis on the acceptability of the target text. They hold the view that translators should obey one of the three rules in functionalist approaches -“intratextual coherence” and the text should be understood by target-culture receivers (Ibid., p.32). And the quality of the target text is determined by its acceptability. Moreover, they also pay special attention to culture-specificity. According to functionalist approaches, translation involves the comparison of cultures (Ibid., p.34). As Chinese and English belong to different cultures, it is translators’ responsibility to compare these two different cultures when translating. Translators should bear the target culture and the target readers’ response in mind.

All these views shed light on the literary translation. Translators can gain much enlightenment from functionalist translation theory and put it into practice.

3. TRANSLATION OF CHINESE CULTURE-SPECIFIC ITEMS IN HONGLGLOUMENG

Eugene Nida (1964, p.91) once divided culture into five types: ecology, material culture, social culture, religious culture and linguistic culture. Based on this, this paper will discuss the translation of Chinese culture-specific items in *Honglougong* from the five aspects with the comparison of the two English versions: *The Story of the Stone* translated by David Hawkes, a British sinologist and translator, together with John Minford (hereafter referred as “Hawkes”) and *A Dream of Red Mansions* translated by famous Chinese translator Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (hereafter referred as “Yang”).

3.1 Ecology

Ecology means the ecological culture in a given area, which includes the natural environment, geographic conditions, climate and so on. Because of the different ecological cultures, even the same word may have different connotations in different regions.

Example 1: 粉面含春威不露, 丹唇未启笑先闻. (Cao & Gao, 2011, p.35)

Yang: The springtime charm of her powdered face gave no hint of her latent formidability. And before her crimson lips parted, her laughter rang out (X. Y. Yang & G. Yang, 1978, pp.38-39).

Hawkes: The ever-smiling summer face of hidden thunders showed no trace; the ever-bubbling laughter started almost before the lips were parted (Hawkes & Minford, 1973, p.45).

This is the description of Wang Xifeng when Lin Daiyu first met her. “春” in Chinese usually suggests the vigor, life and hope, which give people the impression of being lively and beautiful. Because in China, after the cold winter, the weather turns warm and everything begins to grow in spring. Trees spout; flowers bloom. It is full of green in people’s eyes. Yang’s version uses “springtime charm” to describe Wang Xifeng’s beauty, which is easy for Chinese readers to understand. However, Western readers may be confused, because it is the summer that has the similar connotation to spring in Chinese. Different geographic environments of the two nations bring about different climates. Summer in Britain is not as hot as it is in China. We can see this from Shakespeare’s sonnet: “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate.” (Sun, 1999, p.121) In English culture, summer implies being lovely and temperate, whereas in Chinese culture, summer implies hotness, which is not so pleasant to Chinese people. Therefore, although the English equivalent of “春” is “spring”, because of the different ecology they have different connotations among the source-text and target-text readers. Given this, Hawkes translated it into “the ever-smiling summer face”. According to the top rule of functionalist approaches - “skopos rule”, translation is determined by the purpose. Here, Hawkes’s purpose is to let western readers appreciate this great Chinese novel, which is different from Mr. Yang, who wants to introduce Chinese culture to the whole world. Hawkes translated *Hongloumeng* because he was attracted by the charm of the novel and wanted to share it with the whole world. So considering the cultural differences, he uses domestication to attain the best effect, that is, being accepted by western readers. At that time Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang worked in Foreign Language Press and for himself, he didn’t like the novel, but he had to do it, because that was his job. Therefore, their translation also reflects strong political background in the 1970s of China. In the publisher’s note of Mr. Yang’s version (1978, pp.vii-viii), we can clearly see that his translation is deeply influenced by the social background at that time. They quoted Chairman Mao several times and claimed that the attitude towards the novel was to “reject its feudal dross and assimilate its democratic essence” and the purpose is “developing our new national culture and increasing our national

self-confidence” and to fight against the “new Redologists” led by Hu Shih. Different purposes determine their different translation methods. When studying their translations, we should not forget their different social and cultural backgrounds.

3.2 Material Culture

Material culture refers to the material products human beings create and the corresponding culture, which includes food, clothes, architecture, etc. The words that carry Chinese material culture can be found everywhere in the novel.

Example 2: 明儿是腊八儿了, 世上的人都熬腊八粥. (Cao & Gao, 2011, p.234)

Yang: Tomorrow is the Feast of Winter Gruel when all men on earth will be cooking their sweet gruel (X. Y. Yang & G. Yang, 1978, p.282).

Hawkes: “Tomorrow is Nibbansday,” he said, “and everywhere in the world of men they will be cooking frumenty (Hawkes & Minford, 1973, p.352).

Originally, “腊八粥” comes from Buddhism. According to the Chinese lunar calendar, “腊八” falls on the eighth day of the last month and on that day the temples will hold activities to memorize the birth of Buddha and offer “腊八粥” to people and now it becomes a kind of traditional food in China. On that day people will make a special porridge, which contains rice, date, peanut, longan, etc. This is a Chinese culture-specific word that does not have an equivalent in western culture. Its untranslatability causes great trouble for translators. Considering the acceptability of the translation, here Mr. Yang translated it into “sweet gruel”. Gruel is a food made by boiling oats with water or milk, which is different from “腊八粥”. Although Western readers can understand the target text, it loses the religious connotation. And in Hawkes’s version, frumenty is used. Frumenty is a popular dish in Western European medieval cuisine, which was made of wheat, milk, eggs or broth. Neither gruel nor frumenty carries the religious meaning. According to the functionalist translation theory, the purpose determines translators’ choice of translation methods. Therefore, with the purpose to display the novel’s charm to western readers, Hawkes created a word “Nibbansday”, hoping that its religious connotation can be transmitted, for the pronunciation of “Nibban” is similar to “涅槃” in Chinese, which means the death and rebirth of Buddha. No matter whether the western readers can understand it or not, the concept of bearing reader’s reception in mind should be appreciated.

3.3 Social Culture

Social culture refers to social customs, beliefs, values, ways of living, etc. in a society. As the encyclopedia of the late feudal society in China, the novel contains countless words that reflect Chinese social culture.

Example 3:俗语说的好：“一龙九种，种种各别。”未免人多了，就有龙蛇混杂，下流人物在内。(Cao & Gao, 2011, pp.117-118)

Yang: ...as the proverb so aptly says, “A dragon begets nine offspring, each one different.” And inevitably among so many boys there were low types too, snakes mixed up with dragons (X. Y. Yang & G. Yang, 1978, p.135).

Hawkes: ...but as the proverb rightly says, ‘there are nine kinds of dragon and no two kinds are alike’. Where many are gathered together the wheat is sure to contain a certain amount of chaff; and this school was no exception in numbering some very ill-bred persons among its pupils (Hawkes & Minford, 1973, p.162).

“一龙九种” originates from Chinese legend, meaning that dragon has nine sons who are totally different from each other. Then it’s used to mean people’s characters, hobbies and habits are different. “种” in Chinese has two different meanings in the sentence. The first one means “offspring” and the second one means “kind”. Hawkes translated it into “nine kinds of dragon”, which is an obvious misunderstanding of the proverb. “龙蛇混杂” is also an idiom in Chinese with the meaning of good people is mixed with bad people. In China dragon is a totem, a symbol of power and luck. In the past, emperors wore clothes patterned with dragons. And we are proud to say that we are the offspring of the dragon. However, in western culture, the dragon is a brutal beast and represents evil. So today, in order to avoid cultural misunderstanding, we tend to use “loong” instead of “dragon”. We can see this from the translation of the name of famous Chinese martial artist “Lee Hsien Loong”. And for the same reason, in 2008 Olympic Games, we didn’t use dragon as the mascot, which was the most popular one in Chinese people at that time. Thus, Mr. Yang’s translation “snakes mixed up with dragons” will cause readers’ misunderstanding of the target text. Considering readers’ response, Hawkes chooses “wheat” and “chaff” that western readers are familiar with to substitute “龙” and “蛇”, and uses more words than Mr. Yang to explain it. Thus, Hawkes’s translation is easier to be accepted by the target readers. According to the rule of “intratextual coherence” of functionalist translation theory, the target text must be accepted by the target readers and the quality of the target text is determined by its acceptability. Based on this standard, Hawkes’s version is better than Mr. Yang’s.

3.4 Religious Culture

Different nations have different religious cultures. Buddhism and Taoism are the main religions in China, whereas westerners mainly believe in Christianity and Catholicism. Chinese religious culture is also reflected in the novel and then from the following example we will see how these two translators deal with the words that contain Chinese religious culture.

Example 4: 再那经上还说：西方有位大光明普照菩萨，专管照耀阴暗邪祟，若有善男信女潜心供奉者，

可以永保儿孙康宁，再无撞磕邪祟之灾。(Cao & Gao, 2011, p.293)

Yang: The sutras tell us of a great Bodhisattva in the west whose glory illumines all around and whose special charge it is to bring to light the evil spirits in dark places. If faithful believers worship him devoutly, their descendants are assured of peace and health and no evil spirits can get possession of them (X. Y. Yang & G. Yang, 1978, p.360).

Hawkes: According to what the Scripture says, there’s a Bodhisattva of Universal Light living in the Paradise of the West who spends his time lighting up the dark places where these evil spirits lurk, and if any believer, male or female, will make offerings to that Bodhisattva in a proper spirit of devoutness, he will grant their children and grand-children his holy peace and protect them from possession by devils and from the powers of darkness (Hawkes & Minford, 1973, p.450).

In the source text, “经” and “菩萨” come from Buddhism. So Mr. Yang uses “sutra”, which means Buddhist textbooks, while Hawkes uses “scripture”, which means the Bible. Hawkes changes Buddhism into Christianity, so the target reader can have the same reaction with the readers of source text while reading. In Hawkes’ version, we can see many such examples. According to functionalist translation theory, the cultural gap between the source-text receivers and the target reader can sometimes be bridged by additional information or adaptations (Nord, 2001, p.86). Thus, to help western readers to understand, Hawkes also adopts the translation method of amplification, that is, add “paradise” to the “west”. That is because “西方” in Chinese contexts, usually has the connotation of “the place where Buddha lives” and we can see it from another classical Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. The “west” has similar connotation to “paradise” where God lives. And there is another phrase in the source text that carries religious culture- “邪祟”, which is replaced by “devil” in Hawkes’s version, referring to Satan in Christianity. In this way, the target reader can have the similar reaction to the readers of source text to the greatest extent.

3.5 Linguistic Culture

Linguistic culture refers to the specific characteristics each language has, including phonetic, lexical, grammatical features, etc. In *Hongloumeng*, examples of Chinese linguistic culture are too numerous to list. The following is a case in point.

Example 5: 薄命女偏逢薄命郎 葫芦僧判断葫芦案 (Cao & Gao, 2011, p.47)

Yang: An Ill-Fated Girl Meets in Ill-Fated Man
A Confounded Monk Ends a Confounded Case (X. Y. Yang & G. Yang, 1978, p.53)

Hawkes: The Bottle-gourd girl meets an unfortunate young man

And the Bottle-gourd monk settles a protracted lawsuit (Hawkes & Minford, 1973, p.62)

“Literary language has a particular connotative, expressive or aesthetic meaning of its own” (Nord, 2001, p.81). In this way, the literary text has a specific value of its own, which can be referred to as function of the literary text (Ibid., p.82). Translators should try to fulfill the function and transmit the connotative, expressive or aesthetic meaning of literary language. The language is used in *Honglouloumeng* fully displays the charm of Chinese, which may cause difficulty for translators. This example is the title of Chapter Four. There are two parallel phrases: “薄命” and “葫芦”. Apart from this, pun is also used in the phrase “葫芦”. “葫芦僧” refers to Jia Yucun’s attendant who once was a novice in the Gourd Temple. And the pronunciation of “葫芦” in Chinese is similar to “糊涂”, which means “confused” and it implies that Jia Yucun confusedly settles the case according to the novice’s suggestion. In Mr. Yang’s version, the two parallel phrases were translated into “ill-fated” and “confounded”, which keep the linguistic charm of the source text. Although the pun of the source text is lost in translation, the target text can be accepted by readers. Hawkes creates a new parallel phrase “bottle-gourd”. While keeping the original image of “葫芦”, the implied meaning is lost. And the target reader may not understand the meaning of “bottle-gourd girl”. Culture’s specificity calls for our special attention to culture-specific items. While transmitting the linguistic charm of the source text, translators should not forget the acceptability of the target text and the target reader’s response.

CONCLUSION

With functionalist translation theory as the theoretical basis, this paper discusses the translation of Chinese culture-specific items in *Honglouloumeng* through the comparison of the two English versions- David Hawkes’s and Yang Hsien-yi’s version. Functional translation

theory is generally acknowledged being an innovation of translation theory. Its greatest contribution to translation is that it moved translation from a static linguistic phenomenon to be considered as an act of intercultural communication. By breaking the chain of linguistic translation, it frees translators from the concept of loyalty to the source text alone. It gives much guidance to literary translation. Culture-specificity requires that translators be very aware of the cultural differences. And a translation should be acceptable in the target culture, so the acceptability of the target text is another point that translator should take into account. Functional translation theory also holds the view that the most important factor that determines translational action is the purpose. The translators of these two versions have different purposes and social backgrounds, hence the different translation methods. Therefore, when studying their translations, we should not forget their different social and cultural backgrounds.

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