On the Translation of Traditional Chinese Medical Terms in Moment in Peking

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Abstract. This paper intends to make a study on how Lin Yutang translated Traditional Chinese Medical Terms in his novel Moment in Peking. In this novel, there are many Traditional Chinese Medical Terms. Lin Yutang mainly used literal translation, transliteration and borrowing of modern medicine terms. These methods are applied properly, so readers understand the terms and get some knowledge of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Lin achieved his aim of introducing Chinese culture to the western world.

Introduction

Lin Yutang was a bilingual writer, writing both in English and Chinese. Although he is a Chinese, he spent most of his time in English writing. He aimed at introducing Chinese culture to the world through his writing, which proved to be very successful. The background of all his writing was China, including its people and its culture. Under such a background, a lot of Chinese expressions were involved in his writing, either from literature works or customs or other sources. So many scholars agreed that Lin’s writing process was not simply a literary creation, but also a process of translation. Traces of translation were wrapped in his English writing. It is a tactful way of packing Chinese culture based on the principle of seeking common while keeping the different [1]. When Lin translated, he did it flexibly, making it very easy to be accepted by the English readers. Moment in Peking was Lin’s first English novel, published in 1939 in America. In this novel, many Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) terms were involved. How to translate these terms which are difficult to understand to English readers is a big challenge, but Lin did it successfully.

A Brief Introduction of Lin Yutang

Lin Yutang was born in 1895 to a Christian family in a small village in Fujian province, China. His father was a clergyman who was very interested in western culture. He read magazines and newspapers about western society and introduced the information to his children. He dreamed that his sons would go to the best universities in the world to receive their education. And this dream came true later. Lin received education in church schools from primary school to university. In 1912 when he was 17, he was accepted by Saint John’s University in Shanghai, which was famous for its English teaching at that time. In the university, Lin read a lot of books about western society and culture and his English improved. After graduation, he went to Beijing and worked as a teacher. Later, he got a chance to receive further education in Harvard University. He received his master’s degree from Harvard University in 1922 and PhD in linguistic from Leipzig University in 1923[2].

Lin’s fluent English enabled him to write in English. In 1920s to 1930s, he wrote a lot of essays both in English and in Chinese and had them published in popular journals and newspapers. His English essays were humorous and sarcastic, thus attracted a lot of readers including the famous American writer Pearl S. Buck who was living in China then. It was Mrs. Buck who encouraged Lin to write English works and had them published in America. In 1933, Mrs. Buck proposed that Lin write a book about China and Lin readily agreed because that idea was long in his mind. In 1935, My Country and My People was finished and published in America. Upon publication, it caused a sensation. Lin became a household name in America overnight. Greatly encouraged by the success,
Lin continued to write other English books. He wrote more than 30 English books, and most of them were very popular, being translated into many languages and published worldwide. Due to the success of these works, he became known as a “wise and witty” popularizer of Chinese philosophy and way of life [3].

**Moment in Peking**

Moment in Peking was Lin Yutang’s first English novel and one of the most widely read ones. It was first published in America in 1939. It described the turmoil from 1900 to 1938 in Chinese society and what happened to the three big families, namely Yao, Tseng and New family, in Beijing. The leading character is Yao Mulan, the eldest daughter of Yao family. The novel began with the departure of Yao family from Peking to their Hangchow home in the south to get away from the turmoil in Peking. Mulan got lost on the way, but was luckily found by her father’s friend Mr. Tseng, who later became her father-in-law. The story moved on with the changes happened to Chinese society and to the characters in the novel and ended in 1938 when Mulan and her families were forced to join the millions of refugees making for the interior of China because of the Japanese invasion.

The novel became a selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, which selected popular works and greatly promoted their sales. The critics gave favorable comments on it. It “may well become the classic background novel of modern China”, said Time magazine [4].

Since it is a story happened in China and to Chinese people, much cultural information are involved, including funeral rituals, wedding ceremony, Traditional Chinese Medicine, etc. But unlike My Country and My People, Moment in Peking is not a book specified in introducing culture. Long paragraphs of culture introduction are not suitable, so Lin had to tactfully interweave Chinese culture into the development of the story. For example, in book one, Lin described the funeral of Mannia’s father. Mannia was a cousin of the Tseng children and Pingya’s (the eldest son of Tseng family) fiancée. When her father died, Lin described the funeral in detail. It began with a forty-nine-day of mourning. They sat up altars in the courtyard and had monk-priests to say the number of masses requisite to save the soul of the deceased from Hell. Mannia and her mother dressed all in white during the “seven times seven” days, and at night they slept behind the curtain in the hall to keep vigil over the coffin. Friends and relatives visited to pay respects to the deceased. These descriptions made readers get a general idea of how a funeral ceremony was carried out in China. But it’s not just a description of a funeral; it also showed the love between Mannia and Pingya. The introduction of Traditional Chinese Medicine was mainly in the following chapters which described Pingya’s disease.

**Traditional Chinese Medical Terms**

TCM and western medicine are very different, with different views of human bodies and diseases. TCM originated in ancient China, using herbal medicines and various mind and body practices to cure or prevent diseases. The terms they used are also completely different. Unlike the western medicine, where medical terms are essentially scientific concepts, the medical terms in TCM are mainly philosophical ideas [5]. Many of these terms are concise yet complicated in meaning, having different meanings in different contexts. These terms are difficult to understand to western readers, even to Chinese readers who are not familiar with TCM. A typical example is *yin* and *yang*, an important pair of terms in TCM. It may mean “the male and female” or “sexual activities” or “the *yin* and *yang* meridians” and others [6]. So they should not be transliterated in all cases, but translated according to its real meaning in the context.

In Moment in Peking, there are many TCM terms involved. Mulan’s father Yao Si-an was a businessman, running tea shops and herbal medicines shops and other business. So TCM terms could be seen from time to time in the story. Yao Si-an was very open-minded on the education of his children. So unlike other girls who received little education, the Yao sisters learned what they liked from childhood. Mulan was interested in herbal medicines and she gradually learned by heart the...
names of many herbal medicines and their functions. She knew that in TCM theory food and medicine are mixed, many food are used as medicines, some food are “cold” while some are “hot” to human body. For example, crabs are considered “cold” and eel was “hot”.

In chapter seven to chapter nine, readers would find a lot of TCM terms, for these chapters were about Pingya’s disease. Pingya fell seriously ill two years after the funeral of Mannia’s father. In February, he had an attack of intermittent fever and was quickly cured by his drinking a medicinal stew of sickle-leaved hare’s ear and other plants. But in the end of April, he was sent to bed again, with fits of shivering and headache, and soreness of the neck. The Imperial Physician came and felt Pingya’s pulse and prescribed a stew of ephedra, cinnamon barks, fried licorice powder and almonds, which was the characteristic treatment for the beginning of Shanghan. Half a month passed, but Pingya’s fever did not subside and his pulse began to sink which frightened his mother. So Pingya’s mother decided to send for Mannia for a hurried wedding in sickness for tsunghsi. Pingya and Mannia soon married. But tsunghsi didn’t work, Pingya finally passed away a week after the marriage. With the development of the story, readers came to know more and more TCM terms.

Lin Yutang’s Translation Methods of TCM Terms

Due to the differences between TCM and western medicine, it is difficult to make western readers understand TCM terms. On the one hand, Lin tried to retain the characteristics of the original language and the cultural element; on the other hand, he should take readers’ lack of knowledge of Chinese culture into account. Hence, Lin used rather flexible translation methods in the novel.

**Literal Translation with Interpretation.** Literal translation is the most commonly used method in translating traditional cultural information [7]. In order to retain the exoticism of Chinese culture; Lin often used literal translation in translating TCM terms. The advantage of literal translation is that it can retain the original form and meaning, so that readers will get a very close understanding of the text as the original readers. What’s more, western readers can feel the huge differences between TCM and western medicine. But in many cases, literal translation is not enough to make readers understand. So Lin often briefly explained right after the terms translated literally.

Example 1: She knew that crab and persimmons did not go together, that crab was “cold” and eel was “hot” for the body.

In TCM theory, some foods are considered “cold”, and some are “hot” for the body. In Chinese, when people talked about “cold” and “hot” food, they don’t plus “for the body” for it’s evident to everyone. When Lin translated them into English, he translated literally so that to keep the image of “cold” and “hot” food. But this may lead to misunderstanding, for the western readers will take the literal meaning, assuming that it is about the temperature of the food. So Lin added “for the body” after the translation. The explanation is very short, yet very useful. This method is actually widely used in Lin’s English works.

Example 2: He came and felt Pingya’s pulse and would say nothing but prescribed a stew of ephedra, cinnamon barks, fried licorice powder and almonds, to induce perspiration.

“Looking, listening, asking and feeling the pulse” are the four diagnostic methods used in TCM. Looking means when a patient came to see a traditional Chinese medicine doctor, the doctor will first observe the appearance and movement of the patient. Listening means the doctor listens to the patient’s description of his symptoms; asking means the doctor asks the patient questions; feeling the pulse means the doctor feels the pulse on the patient’s wrist. These four steps will help the doctor decide what’s wrong with the patient and prescribe accordingly. In this example, Lin translated “bamai” literally into “feeling the pulse” without explanation. But this term appeared many times in the following story, so the meaning gradually became clear to the readers. Pingya gets worse and worse with the development of the story, and his pulse changed. Lin described it as “His pulse, which had always been ‘on the surface’ or easily noticeable, began to sink” and “His pulse was weak and sluggish”, “The doctor had to press all three figures on his wrist to feel the pulse beat, and this was a sign the volume of blood was decreasing”. In these descriptions, Lin used literal translation with interpretation. For “his pulse had always been on the surface”, he translated “fumai” literally into “on
the surface”, and explained by saying “or easily noticeable”. Through these descriptions, readers will get a quite clear idea of what “feel the pulse” is. The names of herbal medicines here were translated literally, and the last several words “to induce perspiration” were used to explain the function of the medicines.

**Transliteration with Interpretation.** Some scholars believed that transliteration is the only way to keep the unique meaning of TCM terms. But it is difficult for readers to understand [7]. Many TCM terms are unique expressions in Chinese, so no equivalence can be found in English. In these cases, Lin applied transliteration. But terms transliterated mean nothing to the readers, so Lin had to interpret them after the translation.

Example 3: So when she went to the Tsengs’ home and learned of the prescription, she recognized it as the characteristic treatment for the beginning of *Shanghan*, and told her parents so on her return.

In this example, Lin applied transliteration to translate the disease into Shanghan. He knew that *Shanghan* meant nothing to the western readers, so he explained in detail what *Shanghan* was in the next paragraph beginning with “Now *Shanghan* was the disease which the doctors most dreaded……the most complicated disease in Chinese medicine”. Then he continued to explain how the disease attacks human body, or the *yin* and *yang* systems. *Yin* and *yang* are two important terms in TCM. Lin also used transliteration to translate the two terms, and explained in detail how they worked in human body in the next paragraph.

Example 4: Then, as the patient steadily grew worse, a more drastic medicine was used, consisting of rhubarb, thorny limebush, magnolia officinalis, and even manghsiao, a product of saltpeter in fine crystals.

Pingya was getting worse and worse, so the doctor had to prescribe more powerful medicines including manghsiao. Manghsiao is the name of herbal medicine. Transliteration was used here, followed with an interpretation “a product of saltpeter in fine crystals”. In the next chapter, it was mentioned again in Mannia and Mulan’s conversation. Mannia was worried about Pingya’s disease, but she knew little about medicine. When Mulan visited her, she asked Mulan what she thought of Pingya’s illness. Mannia knew that manghsiao was used, so she asked “Isn’t saltpeter what they make gunpowder from?” Mulan replied “Of course, it is.” And she continued that manghsiao was only used in extreme cases and must be used sparingly. Mannia was shocked by the idea of man eating gunpowder. So Mulan explained “When there is poison in the body, the poison receives the effect of the purgative, but if there is no poison, then the bodily system itself is injured.” By implanting the introduction of TCM terms into the conversation of the characters, Lin explained this difficult term clearly.

**Borrowing of Modern Medicine Terms.** Some TCM terms are very difficult to understand for the western reader when translated literally, but there are similar expressions in modern medicine. In such cases, Lin borrowed modern medicine terms to help readers understand.

When Lin introduced the disease *Shanghan*, he first described it as the most complicated disease in Chinese medicine, he then continued to describe the symptoms “It combined a variety of illnesses, with alternate spells of chills and fever”, finally he concluded that “The modern term for it is ‘intestinal fever’. ” After all these explanations, especially by borrowing the modern term, readers will understand what *Shanghan* is.

Example 5: The doctor, being more or less helpless or at least never sure of himself in a case of *shanghan*, greatly encouraged this proposal, which modern doctors now describe as combined psychological treatment.

When Pingya was getting worse, her mother was frightened. She thought of sending for Mannia, for she believed the origin of Pingya’s disease was a case of “love-sickness”, what’s more, she believed in *tsunghsi*, or confronting an evil by a happy event. So she proposed this to the doctor, and the doctor also encouraged this proposal. In order to make readers understand *tsunghsi*, Lin added “which modern doctors now describe as combined psychological treatment”. This is very easy to understand for the western readers.
Besides the above-mentioned methods, Lin also used some other methods, such as omission of details. Let’s see this example in chapter IV, Book one. After Mulan was found by Mr. Tseng, she followed the family to their home at Tai-an, Shantung. One day, the children were playing in the garden. Chinya, the second son of Tseng family, asked Mulan to go up the tree to get a cicada shell, but he came down himself and left Mulan alone on the tree. Mulan was frightened; Chinya didn’t help but laugh at her, so she was more frightened and fell down and lost consciousness. Mr. Tseng was furious, so he flogged Chinya heavily with a birch rod. After all these chaos, the grandmother who worried that the two children would be frightened, ordered a medicinal stew to calm the hearts of both Mulan and Chinya. In this example, the details were omitted, Lin didn’t say what herbal medicines were included, but only pointed out the function of the medicine, that is “to calm the hearts”.

Summary
Lin Yutang aimed to introduce Chinese culture to the western world, and he knew what kind of writing would be accepted by the readers. In his writing, which often was a process of translation, he used translation methods which on the one hand, can retain the exoticism of Chinese culture, on the other hand, can be easily understood by the readers. This strategy worked, and Lin’s works were very popular in the western world from 1930s to 1950s. Unlike My Country and My People, Moment in Peking is not a cultural book, so long paragraphs of culture introduction is not suitable. Lin mixed the introduction of cultural information into the story in a subtle way, mainly by adding short explanations. Through flexible translation, Lin introduced Traditional Chinese Medicine to English readers successfully.

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References