A Contextual Study of “Mellow” in Lin Yutang’s My Country and My People and Its Two Chinese Versions

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Abstract. This paper adopts an approach of contextual analysis to the study of the meaning of “mellow” in Lin Yutang’s My Country and My People and its two Chinese translations. “Mellow” is the first one of the eight words that Lin Yutang uses in his work to describe the character of the Chinese people. “Mellow” is translated differently in two popular Chinese versions of the book. In order to explore both the denotative meanings and connotative meanings of this word, this paper makes a thorough examination of the context in which “mellow” appears in the book. Besides, in reference to the entries in Lin Yutang’s Chinese-English Dictionary of Modern Usage where the word “mellow” is used, the author of this paper reveals the original information that Lin Yutang wanted to convey with “mellow” and then evaluates the two different translations of this word.

Introduction

Lin Yutang is a Chinese translator, writer, dictionary maker, and inventor. He got his M.A. from Harvard University and PhD from Leipzig University in Germany. He has written in English over 30 works, including the translation of Chinese literary classics into English. Many of his English works are internationally known as best-sellers, such as The Importance of Living, My Country and My People, and Wisdom of China and India. Some of his works have been used as textbooks in American universities; some have been used by American government as a must-read to learn about China. He has been nominated as candidate for Nobel Prize in literature twice in 1940 and 1950 and was one of the most influential writers in his generation. He hoped to make the Chinese language machine-readable, and he invented the Chinese typewriter which was character-based and got the patent for it (Ming Kwai Typewriter) in the United States in 1952. After his return to Hong Kong from the United States, Lin Yutang started to work on his lifelong dream—to compile a Chinese-English dictionary. In 1972, Lin Yutang’s Chinese-English Dictionary of Modern Usage was published by the Chinese University Press.

Lin Yutang’s work My Country and My People has been regarded by Pearl S. Buck as “the truest, the most profound, the most complete, the most important book yet written about China” (Lin Yutang, 2009: XVII). In this book, Lin Yutang confesses that he is not ashamed of his own country and he loves his country so much that he can lay bare the troubles in China at his time. In My Country and My People, Lin uses eight words to describe the character of Chinese people, namely: “mellowness”, “patience”, “indifference”, “old rougery”, “pacifism”, “contentment”, “humor” and “conservatism”.

My Country and My People has two versions of Chinese translation, one by Huang Jiade, the other by Hao Zhidong and Shen Yihong. The two versions have different styles and each has their own merits. The Chinese versions are very important because most Chinese readers get to know My Country and My People via its Chinese translations. Only a small part of Chinese readers have read the English version. However, during the translation process, the meaning of words may be changed due to many factors, such as cultural differences between the source language and the target language, or the subjectivity of the translator.
Some readers are offended by Lin’s use of these words and they think that the description brings disgrace to the Chinese people. Therefore it is necessary to see what Lin Yutang really means by using these words. In this paper, the author is going to take the word “mellow” as a case study.

“Mellow” in the Context and Dictionary Entries

In My Country and My People, “mellow(ness)” appears 24 times, 12 times when it is used with a positive meaning, in combination with words like “kindly humor”, “daintiness”, “reasonableness”, “equanimity”, “understanding”, “calm”, “endurance”, “tolerance”, “wisdom”, “patience”, “harmony”, “good old wine”, “content”, and a profound style of Chinese literature. It appears 7 times when it is used negatively or ironically with words like “contempt”, “indifference”, “skeptical”, “second-thoughts”, “shrewd”, and “conservatism” and 5 times when it has a neutral meaning as in a subtitle or in description of the color.

In order to reach a greater accuracy about what image Lin Yutang wants to build of the Chinese people and what information Lin Yutang intends to convey to westerners about Chinese people’s character, the author of this paper also examines the way Lin Yutang uses the word in his Chinese-English Dictionary. In the dictionary, Lin uses “mellow(ness)” in the translation of some Chinese characters, namely “chún”(醇), “chún”(淳), “jiào zé”(教澤), an opposition to “huǒqì”(火氣) and “rén shēng”(仁聲) as is shown in the following entries:

1. Mellow wine: 醉酒婦人 indulgence with wine and women.
   醺釀 adj., mellowed, well blended (customs, callig., also 淳化).
   醺美 adj., mellow, superb (also 純, 淳).
   醺釀 adj., wine of old vintage; (fig.) mellow character of a people.
2. 淳 adj. mellow (wine).
3. 教澤 n., the mellowing influence of education.
4. 火氣 adj., (of art work) not mellow.
5. 仁聲 n., (AC) the mellowing influence of classical music and poetry.

The Denotive Meaning and Connotative Meaning of “Mellow”

A word has both its denotive meanings and connotative meanings. According to Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, “The denotive meaning refers to the part of the meaning of a word or phrase that relates to phenomena in the real world or in a fictional or possible world.” (2012: 191). It is regarded as the “central” meaning or “core” meaning of a lexical item. “The connotative meanings of a word show people’s emotions and attitudes towards what the word or phrase refers to.” (2012: 138). They are additional meanings that a word or phrase has beyond its central meaning.

If we consult any English dictionary, we may find out that “mellow” is used to describe fruits or wine when they become ripe and sweet or when they have been kept for a long time. Extractions of “mellow” from the context in My Country and My People show the connotative meanings of “mellow(ness)” that are related, in most cases, to qualities of being good, kind, humorous, calm, wise, tolerant, patient, harmonious, etc. At the same time, in the context, “mellow” shows negative implications like being shrewd, skeptical and indifferent. The above entries in Lin Yutang’s Chinese-English Dictionary of Modern Usage are de-contextualized, communicating the denotive meaning of the word “mellow”. As we can see in all the cases in the dictionary, the meanings of “mellow” are commendatory, which are associated with the good quality of wine and the profoundness of art work and the nourishing effect of music and poetry.
“Mellow” in Two Chinese Versions of My Country and My People

As a Chinese, who writes about his own country and his people in English, Lin Yutang has done a great job by combining “real appreciation with critical appraisal, to see with the mind and feel with the heart” (Lin Yutang, 2009: 13). He has made a multi-dimensional portrayal of China and the Chinese, including their bright sides as well as dark points.

From the above contextual analysis, we can infer that Lin Yutang’s original intention in the use of “mellow(ness)” is to show a positive attitude and objectiveness to the first character of the Chinese people. However, when “mellow” is translated into Chinese, it is translated as “yuán shú” (by Huang Jiade) and “lǎo chéng wēn hòu” (by Hao Zhidong and Shen Yihong). In Modern Chinese Dictionary “yuán shú” means “being shrewd, mature and flexible”. Therefore, “yuán shú” represents both the mature and flexible sides and the shrewd side of the Chinese people. In comparison, “lǎo chéng wēn hòu” is the combination of two Chinese phrases: “lǎo chéng” and “wēn hòu”. In Modern Chinese Dictionary, “lǎo chéng” means “having experienced a lot and being prudent”. “wēn hòu” means “being mild and tolerant”. In a word, “lǎo chéng wēn hòu” lays more emphasis on the positive side of “mellow” and pays less attention to the negative meaning of it which is also indicated in the context in My Country and My People.

The author of this paper thinks that the change in the emphasis on the translation of the word “mellow” is due to the different periods of time which the translators were in. Huang Jiade translated My Country and My People in 1936, shortly after the book was published by Lin Yutang in the United States. Hao Zhidong and Shen Yihong’s translation came out in 1988. As is shown here, Hao and Shen’s version came out more than 50 years after Huang’s version. During those 50 years, the image of the Chinese changed a lot, especially after the Reform and Opening-up of China. As what Shen Yihong once put it, there were more and more courageous people in China who were to become the pillars of the Chinese. Having seen the progress that the Chinese had made and harboring the hope, Hao Zhidong and Shen Yihong as translators were involved actively rather than passively in the translation and gave the book a new tone of description.

Summary

According to the context in which “mellow” appears in Lin Yutang’s work My Country and My People, and the entries that include the word in his Chinese-English Dictionary of Modern Usage, “mellow” has more of a positive meaning than a negative meaning. Of course, when Lin Yutang uses it to depict the character of Chinese people, it has negative implications like “being too smart” or “shrewd”. But its positive implications occupy a major part. Huang Jiade’s translation of “mellow” as “yuán shú” is more faithful to the original information that Lin Yutang intends to convey. Hao Zhidong and Shen Yihong’s translation of “mellow” as “lǎo chéng wēn hòu” lays more emphasis on the positive implications of the word and understates its negative implications. Different emphasis in the translation of this word is a result of the time in which the translators were in.

References