On Chinese Classic English Translation under the Guidance of Thick Translation Theory

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the deep cultural meaning of the culture-loaded terms and analyzes their corresponding translation strategies by taking Health and Pleasure (Yi Yang Bu) as the data, a chapter in Li Yu’s Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling (Xian Qing Ou Ji). The research and the practical analysis work is carried out under the guidance of Halliday’s Cultural Context Theory and Appiah’s Thick Translation Theory. The purpose of the research is to find out how to achieve context equivalence in the translation of culture-loaded terms of the Chinese Classics.¹

INTRODUCTION

Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling (Xian Qing Ou Ji) [1], a book written by Li Yu, a well-known writer and dramatist in the late-Ming and early-Qing Dynasty, is regarded as an encyclopedia of the leisure life in ancient China. Providing a panorama of ancient Chinese life, this book has been given extremely high appraisal not only by Chinese famous scholars such as Yutang Lin and Qiuyu Yu, but also by international sinologist including Hanan, Franz Kuhn, and Haruo Oka and so on. It is no exaggerating to say that this book has no parallel in terms of the scope and subject matters it deals with, which makes it such a remarkable encyclopedia that holds a comprehensive summary of information from all branches of people’s life in the ancient time.

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Taking Health and Pleasure (Yi Yang Bu), the eighth chapter Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling (Xian Qing Ou Ji) as the data, this paper analyzes the culture-loaded terms in this chapter from the perspective of cultural context, aiming to explore the deep cultural connotations embedded in these terms. Then, under the guidance of Halliday’s Cultural Context Theory and Appiah’s Thick Translation Theory, this paper is to carry out a practical translation analysis of the culture-loaded terms in order to find a way to translate culture-loaded terms and provide a new perspective for the translation study of Chinese Classics in both theory and practice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Czech structuralist Roman Jackson, translation can be divided into three categories: intra-lingual translation, inter-lingual translation and inter-semiotic translation. Generally, the process of translating Chinese classics into English or other languages usually consists of two steps: translating from classical Chinese into modern Chinese, which belongs to intra-lingual translation; translating from modern Chinese language into English or other languages, which belongs to inter-lingual translation. Since most Chinese classics are written hundreds or thousands of years ago, the great difference in the history and culture between the ancient China and modern society results in the biggest obstacle standing in the way of fully comprehending and properly translating these masterpieces. Besides, hidden logic and abundant culture-loaded information also add extra burden to the translators.

Generally speaking, people tend to use certain specific words or expressions to communicate with others. Whether in original or conceptual sense, words and expressions which contain specific cultural meanings are called cultural-loaded terms. Similar to culture, different scholars have put forward different standards towards the classification of culture-loaded terms. In the book Toward A Science of Translation, Nida divides culture-loaded terms into five categories, namely, the ecological culture-loaded terms, the religious culture-loaded terms, the social culture-loaded terms, the linguistic culture-loaded terms and the material culture-loaded terms [2]. Peter Newmark also divides the culture-marked words into five categories [3], which share a lot in common with Nida’s classification. Since both classifications are widely adopted by people in analyzing the translation of culture-loaded terms, the author just chooses the simpler one — Nida’s classification in this paper.

Context was first put forward by anthropologist Malinowski in the 1920s. Then, in the book Language, Context and Text, Halliday makes further explanation, saying that language is the carrier of culture, and the context of culture reflects the cultural background that a certain language lies in [4]. During the process of translating culture-loaded terms, translators are usually restricted or influenced by cultural factors existing in speech community of both source and target text, such as customs, value orientations, cultural conceptions, and mode of thinking. Therefore,
when it comes to translating culture-loaded terms, it is necessary for translators to take these factors into consideration.

The concept of “thick translation”, also known as “thick contextualization”, was first put forward by the American philosopher and cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah in 1993. According to Appiah, translation was not a kind of accurate conversion from a language to another language, because of the un-equivalence between two different cultures [5]. Barriers exist in translation, especially metaphors, proverbs which do not always mean what they literally say and will possibly cause misunderstanding between the original author and the target readers. By adding an extended introduction, glossaries and annotations to explain the rich cultural and language background, the source culture can be appreciated for the people in the other cultures [6].

Since Appiah put forward “thick translation”, many translators have tried to put it into translation practice. The source text in our research belongs to Chinese classics and involves a large number of culture-loaded terms, which constitutes the biggest difficulty in understanding and translating as well. Appiah’s Thick Translation Theory, which defines translation as “seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context”, can provide us a fundamental theory to solve this difficulty.

CASE STUDY

Ecological Culture-Loaded Terms

Nida explains ecological factor as the geographical features of language, such as flora, winds, hills, rain, and seasons [2]. Due to the cultural differences, people may have the different understandings of the same ecological feature, which could stand in the way of successfully cross-cultural communication. Ecological culture-loaded terms often include names of places and particular events. Since China is a large country with a long history, one proper name may contain rich cultural meanings. In the Health and Pleasure (Yi Yang Bu), terms and expressions about geographic characteristics appear frequently. Let’s look at the following examples.

**Example 1**

**ST:** 昔人传韩非书至秦秦王见之曰: “寡人得见此人与之游, 死不恨矣!”

**TT:** It is related by history that after reading the book written by Han Fei, Emperor of Qin ① said: “If I could make friends with this man and travel with him, I would die without regrets!”

**Footnote:** ①Qin is a state of Zhou Dynasty.

**Example 2**
Having been honored as the King of Fenyang, Guo gained perfect contentment from his life and pursued nothing else afterwards, which enabled him to fully enjoy the pleasure derived from his service under the emperor.

Footnote: ①Fenyang is a small principality of Han Dynasty.

Analysis: Ancient China usually had several hived-off states, which might sound peculiar to western readers. In fact, though “Qin” and “Fenyang” are both names of administrative unit, their cultural meanings are different. “Qin” was an dependent country, while “Fenyang” was an official closure of Han Dynasty. When doing translation work, besides employing the transliteration method, thick translation is also needed here to add further culture information by means of annotation. Thus, the translator translates “Qin” into Qin, with a footnote of “a state of the Zhou Dynasty”, while “Fenyang” into Fenyang with a footnote of “a small principality of Han Dynasty”. Only in this way, can some specific Chinese cultures be fully presented before western readers. At the same time, readers who are interested in Chinese culture could also learn something about ancient Chinese culture from the translation, such as “principalities”, and “state”. Thick translation is adopted here by adding a footnote to provide target readers context information to avoid cross-culture miscommunication.

Material Culture-Loaded Terms

Because of the difference in customs, even the same things may lead to different meanings. It is common that what is ordinary in one culture may appear peculiar in another. Material culture-loaded terms reflect the material civilization created by human beings, which include food, costumes, tools, transportation and so on. Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling (Xian Qing Ou Ji) has a great number of tangible cultural images. Some examples are listed as follows:

Example 3
ST: 时当夏五, 应荐杨梅, 而予之嗜此, 较前人之癖菖蒲、羊枣诸物, 殆有甚焉, 每食必过一斗①。
TT: It was in May, just the time for waxberry to be in season. Waxberry is my most favorite fruit, and I loved it so much that I would eat more than one Dou ① each time, surpassing those predecessors’ love for calamus sauce and dateplum persimmon.

Footnote: ① Dou is a unit of dry measure for grain, and one Dou equals one decalitre. Here, the author used this measure unit to imply that the amount of waxberry he ate was quite large.

Example 4
ST: 少课锱铢之利, 穷民即起颂扬; 略蠲升斗之租, 贫佃即生歌舞。

TT: The poor sing in your praises if you collect less tax from them. The poverty-stricken tenants cheer and jump for joy when you slightly reduce their tent.

Analysis: Units of measurement are important in Chinese material culture. In the examples above, two kinds of measurement units are mentioned. One kind is measure of volume “Dou斗” and “Sheng升”, and the other is that of money “Zi锱” and “Zhu铢”. Since all these measurement units are not used nowadays, it is not easy to for the reader to understand them, let alone the western reader. So, transliteration plus thick translation (a footnote) is employed to preserve cultural image and its profound cultural meanings at the same time.In Example 4, “Zizhu锱铢” and “Shengdou升斗” are not used to refer to concrete measurement of money and volume, but express and emphasize the very small amount of money and grain. Thus, free translation method is a better choice to convey their deep culture meaning.

Social Culture-Loaded Terms

Social culture-loaded terms are words and expressions reflecting the social customs, life style, historical backgrounds and behavior patterns of a nation or an ethnic group. Due to the difference of cultural backgrounds, people living in one culture may not understand the customs, ideologies and political systems in another. So thick translation method is necessary. Here is a typical example.

Example 5

ST: 终身不二色者，何难作背城一战；后宫多嬖侍者，岂能为不败孤军？

TT: If you are loyal to one girl all through your life, then it would be all right for you to apply yourself assiduously to the sexual life on this particular day. But if you have many concubines①, how can you make sure that you can keep your health from being damaged by it?

Footnote:①In ancient China polygamy, which means a man can be legally married to more than one person at the same time, was quite popular. A man with many concubines is morally and legally accepted by people in that era.

Analysis: As we know, in ancient China, polygamy, which means a man can be legally married to more than one person at the same time, was quite popular, especially for the rich people in high position. In this example, when the culture-loaded term “Bishi嬖侍” is translated into English, literal translation method plus thick translation (note) is a good choice to explain clearly through the annotation about “concubines(嬖侍)”.

Religious Culture-Loaded Terms

Religion is always an integral part of a culture. Religious culture-loaded terms refer to those words and phrases reflecting certain religious traditions. In Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling (Xian Qing Ou Ji), the reader can find plenty of Buddhist and Taoist philosophical thoughts embodied and realized by religious
culture-loaded terms, such as “Tian天”, “Ming命”, “Dao道”. These words are very familiar to Chinese readers, but alien to westerners. So, it would be of great importance for the translator to transfer the implied connotative meaning in order to reduce cultural loss. Look at the following example.

Example 6
ST: 予请为息争止谤, 立一公评, 则谓阴阳之不可相无, 忧天地之不可使半也。
TT: Here I want to express my viewpoint in order make a fair judgment and settle these arguments: Yin and Yang①, just like Heaven and Earth②, can’t separate from each other. If they were divided, not only would Earth die, but Heaven would as well.

Footnote: ① Yin and Yang, a core concept in Chinese philosophy, describes how seemingly opposite or contrary forces may actually be complementary, interconnected, and independent in the natural world.
② Heaven and Earth, a key concept in Chinese mythology, philosophy, and religion. These two aspects of Daoist cosmology are representative of the dualistic nature of Taoism.

Analysis: Buddhism and Taoism, the most influential religions in ancient China, have a great influence on the ancient Chinese people’s philosophical thinking and life. For Chinese, the image of “Tian天” is the holiest and inviolable, which can control the fate of every person in the world. In Buddhism, “Tian天” and “Di地” often work together to represent everything in the world, while in Taoism, “Yin阴” and “Yang阳” are usually combined together to express similar meaning. Thus, we try to adopt literal translation to retain the original form, plus thick translation method by offering a footnote to ensure delivering the cultural connotation of these religious terms.

Linguistic Culture-Loaded Terms

Chinese and English are two languages belonging to totally different language families. Due to their differences in history of formation and development, distinctions between Chinese and English are profound and natural. Thus, considerable attention must be paid in translating linguistic culture-loaded terms.

Example 7
ST: 世人忧贫而致疾, 疾而不可救药者, 几与恒河沙比数。
TT: And when they are ill they can’t afford to have their illness cured. There are so many poor people in this world that the number can be compared to that of sands in Ganges River①.

Footnote: ① Ganges River is an Asian river rising in the Himalayas and flowing east into the Bay of Bengal. It is a sacred river of the Hindus. “Sands in Ganges River” is a Chinese idiom originating from the Buddhist classic works Diamond Sutra, which means countless.
Analysis: “Ji Yu Henghesha Bishu 几与恒河沙比数” comes from a Chinese idiom “Henghe Shashu 恒河沙数” meaning countless in number, which originates from the Buddhist classic works Diamond Sutra. Chinese idioms, the bright pearl to Chinese culture, contain profound cultural content and connotation. For translators, how to understand and translate the hidden cultural meanings to achieve cultural context equivalence is of great significance. To assist western target language readers to comprehend the Chinese idiom, literal translation with a detailed note is recommended.

CONCLUSIONS

Chinese Classics, as the embodiment and condensation of Chinese history and culture, have played an irreplaceable role in breaking walls and promoting cultural exchanges between China and the other countries. Language and culture are inseparable; therefore, a good translator should always bear the cultural context in different language system in mind so as to fulfill the special cross-cultural communication act of translation. The translation practice of Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling (Xian Qing Ou Ji) demonstrates that to effectively present the profound cultural content and connotation of the culture-loaded words to the target language readers, thick translation strategy proves to be one of the best choices, which includes literal translation+note, transliteration+note, free translation, etc.

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REFERENCES