

A Study of the English Translation of Culture-loaded Words in *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* from the Perspective of Schema Theory

Rantian Huang

Nanning Normal University, China

Abstract

This paper focuses on the culture value of the novel *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* and tries to probe into the English translation by Howard Goldblatt. Cultural schema theory is a branch of schema theory and different scholars define cultural schema differently. Culture-loaded words are the specific items carrying unique connotation of culture of various nations. Under the guide and framework of cultural schema, this paper analyzes several translation strategies of the translator.

Keywords

Mo Yan, cultural schema, culture-loaded words.

1. Introduction

Life and Death are Wearing Me Out is a novel written by Chinese Nobel Prize winner Mo Yan, first published in 2006. The masterpiece won the first American Newman Chinese Literature Award, recommended as a top world literary work by The Washington Post. The narrative spans the history of China from 1950 to 2000 through the eyes of a man reincarnated as various animals: a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog, a monkey, and finally a human child. With the fantastical theme of the cycle of life and death, it tells the profound historical changes and a series of sorrows and joys that occurred in the countryside in the 50 years after the founding of New China, reflecting the close relationship between farmers and the land. Its English version was published in 2008 by the remarkable sinologist Howard Goldblatt. Of all his translations, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* is arguably the most popular, and this can be credited to Goldblatt's excellent translation skills and solid cultural foundation. As a widely known sinologist and translator, Goldblatt's translation style, translation perspectives and translation strategies are widely studied by many scholars.

2. Literature Review

Aixela lists two challenges from culture-specific items, namely, the item does not exist or enjoys a different textual status in the target language [1]. Besides, Yang holds that cultural differences manifest most prominently in terms of vocabulary, with their scope being equally extensive. In translating the cultural work culture-loaded words, there is no uniform method or formula. Only by thoroughly mastering both languages and cultures, and deeply understanding the spirit of the original work, correctly inferring the author's intentions, while also considering the thoughts and acceptance abilities of the target language audience, can one appropriately absorb the nutrients of the source culture within the framework of the target language culture, can one convey the cultural factors embedded in the loaded vocabulary of the source language accurately [2]. Wang & Wang asserts that the challenge in translating Chinese cultural vocabulary lies in the vacancy, which divides the translation into two categories: complete vacancy and partial vacancy. Appropriate translation strategies are proposed accordingly: (1) For complete vacancy, phonetic transliteration and direct translation take precedence, with an

initial explanation provided for the first occurrence; (2) In cases of partial vacancy, the text and hypertext factors determine the diversity of translation strategies. Finally, the author ventured an outlook on the prospects for research into the translation of Chinese cultural vocabulary [3]. In the same year, Zheng points out that translators should resort to foreignization as much as possible to best spread profound culture of China. Transliteration and explanation is first suggested when dealing with culture-loaded words [4]. Sun & Han adopt adaptation and selection theory in eco-translatology to explore the translatability of culture-loaded words and stress that it is necessary to achieve cognitive transformation when decoding the language, and to build an emotional bridge between the source text and western readers [5].

3. Analysis of Translation Strategies of Three Cases of Cultural Schemata

In this part, the translation strategies adopted by Howard Goldblatt of culture-loaded words in the three cases of cultural schemata are systematically analyzed, and the reasons for the adoption of specific translation strategies in each case are elaborated.

3.1. Cultural Overlap

In spite of the great differences between cultures and races, human beings possess identical or similar experiences in the material lives, which causes them to share common characteristics in their perceptions and conceptions of things. To put it in another way, people may have accumulated appropriately matched cultural schemata. And by applying the proper cultural schemata, mutual comprehension could be easily achieved.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, eco-cultural factors such as animals, plants, climate, and environment are reflected in the vocabulary to form ecological culture-loaded words, while people from different nations possess a consistent perception of numerous things in nature, such as water, mountains, animals, etc. Explicitly, the cultural schemata activated by these ecological culture-loaded words in the east and the west are similar, thus, the literal translation is properly adopted to activate the existing cultural schema in the target language readers' cognition. The plants mentioned in the above examples exist in both China and the West, so the purpose of cultural communication could be achieved by adopting the literal translation strategy.

ST: 三月扶犁，四月播种，五月割麦，六月栽瓜，七月锄豆，八月杀麻，九月掐谷，十月翻地

TT: In the third month I plowed the fields, in the fourth I planted seeds, in the fifth I brought in the wheat, in the sixth I planted melons, in the seventh I hoed beans, in the eighth I collected sesame, in the ninth I harvested grain, and in the tenth I turned the soil.

This is an example of liberal translation. Many farming activities are mentioned above and they are both known by Chinese and western people. These activities show the fact that Ximen Nao has been busy working throughout the year. In these farming's descriptions, we also have a certain understanding of the seasons and customs of agricultural production. In addition, the use of agricultural tools and specific production processes are an important part of agricultural production customs. Through this description, the author not only vividly presents the traditional Chinese agricultural production activities to the target language readers, but also fully demonstrates the hard work's image of Ximen Nao. Similarly, this description also reflects the peasants' desperate resistance to society and life.

3.2. Cultural Divergence

Although people from different cultures possess similar perceptions, sometimes people have varying interpretations of the symbolic meaning connoted by identical things. As a result, there are divergences in expression. If the translator does not deal with them carefully, divergences will appear and target readers may have a hard time comprehending the translated text. In the situation of cultural schema divergence, the translator's work is to activate and adjust target

readers' relevant cultural schemata. In this section, numerous examples will be given to demonstrate how Goldblatt copes with this case.

In *Life and Death*, most units of measurements, such as “尺” “丈” “两” and “里”, are translated by substitution, replacing the Chinese units of measurement with the English units which are more familiar to the target language readers. Although the units translated are not equivalent to the original units, they don't affect the readers' understanding of the plot of the novel, and avoids the trouble of conversion and annotation. It is convenient for the target language readers to perceive the connotation expressed by the translated text, which is a successful strategy to achieve the functional equivalence of such terms.

While translating the above expressions containing “天”, Goldblatt gives full consideration to the English readers' cultural background and replaces the specific Chinese religious schemata with schemata that Westerners familiar with to facilitate their comprehension.

In a word, Howard Goldblatt successfully activates and adjusts the cultural schemata of the source text with the application of free translation and substitution in dealing with social and religious culture-loaded terms in the case of cultural schemata divergence.

3.3. Cultural Vacancy

The culture-loaded words reflecting the vacancy of cultural schemata are the most exclusive in English and Chinese. In many cases, due to the different expression modes and cultural backgrounds of the two languages, things familiar to people or words that can be understood in one culture do not exist in the other culture at all, or the conceptual meaning of the same thing exists in both two cultures, but the cultural connotation is completely lost in the one culture.

The difficulty caused by cultural schema vacancy may be the largest challenge faced by Goldblatt. There are a large amount of typical culture-loaded words in *Life and Death* and *Wearing Me Out*, having no counterparts in English culture, which seem incomprehensible to target readers. Therefore, the translator should not only make the target text easy to understand, but also take into account the degree to which the target language readers will accept some new expressions. In this case, a detailed analysis is given of how the translator performs the task. The translator's ability to cope with the cultural schemata vacancy in translation is illustrated as follows by some examples.

ST: 他是我从关帝庙前雪地里捡回来的孤儿

TT: He was an orphan I'd found in the snow in front of the God of War Temple and brought him home with me.

Here the translator resorts to free translation. In Chinese culture, “关帝庙” not only represents a place, but also as a symbol of bravery “关帝庙” was built to honor Guan Yu, the general of the Shu Kingdom during the Three Kingdoms period. He was crowned as a “the Saint of War” by later generations and was famous as Confucius. Through historical evolution and interpretation of literary works, his image always represents the spirit of loyalty and righteousness. The translator translates the word “庙” into “temple”, which means equality has been achieved at the referential meaning. The existence of Guandi Temple is compared with charitable nature of Ximen Nao who rescued the Blue Face in the novel. Therefore, the translation of the term “关帝庙”, both “关帝” and “庙” have achieved the same meaning as the original text and are able to activate the potential cultural schema of the target readers.

ST: 我这哥，惯常闷着头不吭声，但没想到讲其大话来竟是“博山的瓷盆——成套成套的”

TT: He was normally not much for a talker, so everyone was taken by surprise.

This is an example of omission. This is a common saying that combines two parts. 博山 is located in Zibo City in Shandong Province and is famous for its porcelain. There are many porcelains in

Boshan and most of them are sold in sets. According to the original content, the source language readers can easily know the true connotative meaning. In the text, it refers to the fact that Ximen Jinlong doesn't like to talk with others and is a very quiet image. But when talking about the excitement, everyone was shocked by the impassioned speech that he talked. For readers who do not understand the Chinese cultural background and lack cultural cognition, such a saying full of cultural characteristics will be confused and cannot infer its true meaning. Since the two parts of saying include place name and their special products, literal translation would cause ambiguities to readers in the target language. Therefore, the translator chose to omit the saying and presented it in another way. And he translates the whole sentences as "He was normally not much for a talker, so everyone was taken by surprise."

ST:那时自行车还是紧俏物资，每个大队的支部书记才可以凭票购买一辆!

TT: bicycles were a rarity at the time, and only the branch secretaries were permitted to buy them.

This is an example of liberal translation. During the planned economy period in China, especially before the 1970s, supplies were very scarce. And the earliest implementation of the supply by voucher was food. As for the purchase of large and valuable commodities, there are bicycle tickets and sewing tickets. In the material scarcity era, almost all commodities are strictly vouchers and rationed supplies. For example, you have to line up for rice, oil, meat or fish. In the early period of the reform and opening up, if you want to buy something, just having money is not enough. You need to register with your enterprise first. If approved by the organization, then you can buy what you want. And a unit can be allocated several tickets in a few months, so the tickets can be described as a "rare item". As for the bicycle, an enterprise can only support one or two bicycle supply tickets in a year. The complicated purchase procedure also shows how rare bicycles are at that time.

The translator translates "凭票购买" into "were permitted to buy", which means purchasing permitted", presenting the term "bicycle ticket" is rich in cultural connotations in that specific historical period in China. From the aspect of connotative meaning, it provides the Chinese culture more clearly to the target readers. In order to reduce the misunderstanding and influence of cultural information, and to achieve equal effects of translated content, the translator focuses on the meaning and clearly expresses the author's intentions. The translator uses liberal translation here to make it easier for western readers to understand and grasp its cultural information to the largest extent.

4. Conclusion

Culture-loaded word is an important part of literary works, carrying rich cultural connotations and national characteristics. The vocabulary not only reflects various aspects of Chinese society such as history, culture, and customs, but also embodies Mo Yan's profound reflections on life, fate, morality, and other issues. Studying the English translation strategies of these culture-loaded words can help convey the cultural connotations of Mo Yan's works more accurately and helps to generate new interpretation of texts. With the development of globalization, literary works, as important carriers of cultural exchange, the quality of their translation directly affects the depth and breadth of cultural exchange. By studying the translation strategies of culture-loaded words in Mo Yan's works, it can provide reference and guidance for the translation of other literary works, and enhance the international dissemination and influence of Chinese literary works.

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