A Study on Chinese-English Translation of Folk Culture from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology: With the Translation of Tales of Hulan River as a Case Study

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Abstract: Tales of Hulan River is the most representative work of the famous Chinese writer Xiao Hong. Howard Goldblatt is a famous translator and the winner of the first Xiao Hong Literary Award. Tales of Hulan River is a work with diverse folk culture, describing a large number of folk culture in northeast China. This paper intends to analyze the folk culture in The Tales of Hulan River by applying three-dimensional transformations of eco-translatology. Through the comparative analysis of the two texts, the translation method used by the translator in the translation process is explored to achieve the transformations of the linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions.

Keywords: Tales of Hulan River, Folk culture, Eco-translatology.

1. Introduction

Xiao Hong, known as “the literary goddess of China in the 1930s”, is a famous female writer in China. Howard Goldblatt is a famous translator specialized in Chinese modern and contemporary literature. He has translated multifarious Chinese modern and contemporary literary works and is well-loved by the public. Due to his fantastic translation, Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2021.

Tales of Hulan River is Xiao Hong’s most representative work, which takes the author’s childhood as a clue and tells what happened around her, restoring the social and human conditions of the northeast China at that time. This novel was called “a narrative poem, a colorful painting of the terroir, and a poignant ballad” by Chinese writer Mao Dun. It is still an important material for scholars to study the historical development of Chinese folk culture.

2. Three-Dimensional Transformations of Eco-translatology

Eco-translatology was first proposed by Professor Hu Gengshen from Tsinghua University in 2001. He embedded the biological evolutionary principle of “natural selection and survival of the fittest” proposed by Darwin into translation research, and gradually formed “the theory of translation adaptation selection”, which has been developed into a new translation theory that is called eco-translatology. This is a research paradigm that examines translation from the perspective of ecology as a whole, and ecological translation science defines translation as “translator-led, text-based, multi-cultural conversion as the purpose, and translation is the choice for translator to adapt to ecological environment”. The translation process is a continuous process for translator to adaptation and selection in the translation ecological environment, and the process is constantly alternating [1]. In this process, the translator is the most proactive factor and dominates the translation process, becoming the most critical factor in connecting the source language to the target language, aiming to achieve a successful transformation as much as possible.

As for the translation method of eco-translatology, Three-dimensional transformation mainly includes the transformation of linguistic dimension, cultural dimension and communicative dimension. They have different directions. The adaptation and selection of linguistic dimension refers to the adaptation and selection of linguistic forms, and it focuses on the forms. Every language has its special form. That means translators need to pay attention to the transmission and interpretation of bilingual cultural connotations, and pay attention to the cultural differences between the source language and the target language, to avoid misinterpreting the source language from the target culture, so that the translation could adapt to its cultural system. Not only translators should transfer linguistic information and cultural connotation, but also should focus on the transformations whether the communicative intention of the source language has been reflected [2].

3. Folk Culture in Tales of Hulan River

Folk culture is a stable cultural matter that is gradually formed in the long-term production practice and social life of a social group or even a nation, and is passed down from generation to generation. According to Zhong Jingwen, folk culture is a type of culture that can serve people’s daily life, which is formed in a specific nation, era and region and continuously spread down to the needs of long-term social group life. Mr. Zhong Jingwen mainly divides folk culture into four types: material folk, social folk, spiritual folk and linguistic folk [4]. Tales of Hulan River is a work with rich folk culture, which contains four items. They are material folk, social folk, spiritual folk and linguistic folk.

The material folk includes material life folk and material production folk, which are important material bases to support people’s lives [4]. In Tales of Hulan River, the relevant
The social folk is a customary system in the form of a system or organization set by people according to certain living conditions in their lives. In this novel, there are some events. In terms of marriage etiquette, there are child brides. In federal society, the girls who are in poor family may be sold to a rich family who bought her as a daughter-in-law at an early age. In terms of engagement ceremony, engagement gifts are necessary. In this fiction, after finishing a series of trivial procedures, the girl will be considered as the daughter-in-law in the boy’s family.

The spiritual folk is a special psychological cognitive process that is internalized in the heart. It is a psychological experience that people form in the process of understanding nature and society, and these psychological experiences will become inherent behaviors that guide people’s lives [4]. In this novel, spiritual folk is elaborated by two aspects. One is in daily life, the other is in some festivals. In the daily life, Firstly, “The dance of the sorceress”. The sorceress dresses herself in strange clothing and puts a red skirt around her waist. And then she starts quaking violently and mumbling constantly. People believe she can cure diseases. Secondly, “throwing copper coins into river to pray for safety”. When people crossed the river, they threw two copper coins into the water in order to pray for safety. In this river, there is a large number of copper coins that can be drowned in this river. Thirdly, “Outdoor opera performances”. When the weather is sunny and dry for a long time, the local people will put on willow headdresses to call for rain. They believe Dragon King will take pity on them to give them rain, as they scald on the sun-drenched ground. After their hope come true, they will perform an opera to god for thanking his benevolence. The opera usually lasts for three days. The other aspect is in some festivals. Firstly, “Releasing river lanterns”. The local people set adrift the lanterns on the Hulan River. It is a festival devoted to sprits. In that day, the ghosts have chance to gain release from the nether world as long as they hold a river lantern. Also, it symbolizes the living cherish the memory about the dead. Secondly, “The festival at the Temple of the Immortal Matron”. Women stick buttons onto the back of the Matron of Sons and Grandsons, then they steal off with one of the clay infants that have been placed beside her. By doing these, they believe they will produce sons in the following year. This spiritual folk shows distinguished folk culture in Hulan City.

The linguistic folk appears from the characters. In this fiction, there are some special features. Firstly, some local people have a lyrical heart. For example, the grandfather likes reciting the poetry in evening. Although he is not the intellectual person, he recites poetry to infect his granddaughter. Some famous poetry was shown in this novel. such as, Home Coming, Spring Morning, Flower Shadows, A Quatrain and Theme Capital Nanzhuang. Secondly, their speaking is colloquial. Such as, “Why wasn’t I informed that he’d been here before?” “you fell down and started to bawl!” “That’s good, that’s very good”. “Pull the long saw, Drag the long saw; By Grandpa’s gate they sing an opera song. The daughters are brought, the sons-in-law too; Even the grandchildren all go along”. Thirdly, the atmosphere is humorous. For example, Old Zhao, a steamed bun peddler, falls down on the ice floor in winter. However, he doesn’t complain the bad weather but just say: “Hey, the weather’s icy cold, the frozen ground’s all cracked, and my buns have been swallowed up!”.

4. Three-dimensional Transformations of Folk Culture in English Translation of Tales of Hulan River in Eco-translatology

4.1 The Adaptation and Selection in Linguistic Dimension

The adaptation and selection of linguistic dimension requires the translator to adapt the language form during the translation process[2]. Since Chinese and English cultures have different expressions, the translator must take into full consideration of the overall ecological translation during the translation process. The translator should pay attention to the vocabulary selection and the conversion of the linguistic forms. In the translation of Tales of Hulan River, there are a large number of folk culture that need to convert its linguistic forms. Generally, the transformation of linguistic forms consist of three parts: lexical ecology, sentence ecology and discourse ecology.

4.1.1 Lexical level

As an important part of linguistic expression in the eco-translatology, the reasonable fix of lexical ecology plays a pivotal role in achieving the overall harmony of the eco-translatology, conveying rich connotations. It is worthwhile for us to explore the vocabularies in the translation of Tales of Hulan River. Among them, there are a large number of words with abundant Chinese cultural connotations. Therefore, translators need to take into account the context, fully understand the semantic words in the source language ecosystem, and knows about the usage of words in the target language ecosystem at the same time, so that the translation can realize an effective conversion from source language system to the target language system[2].

Example1:

ST: 那叫作高等小学的，没有蚕吃。那里边的学生的确比农业学校的学生长得高
TT: There are no edible silkworms in the Higher Elementary School, where the students are clearly taller than those in the Agricultural School.

Analysis: From the context, this sentence talks about folk custom of eating silkworms in some school in autumn. It belongs to material folk. The translator uses conversion. In the source sentence, “吃” is a verb while the translator changed the verb into an adjective “edible” to make the sentence more fluent. Because the structure of English sentence is more compact than Chinese sentence, the translation realizes the conversion of the class. In doing so, the translation can achieve the lexical ecology.

Example2:

ST: 再说那后来的人，依法炮制，那花样也不多，也只是东抓抓，西摸摸。
TT: Then comes the next individual, who must prepare himself for a dose of the same medicine. There are few choices available to him—about all he can do is grab hold here and clutch there.

Analysis: Form the context, this sentence belongs to a part of story that a cart fell into a quagmire need some help. However, the local people didn’t help them just be onlookers. We can know the folk custom is indifferent and callous among the local people in an indirect way. “依法炮制” is a Chinese idiom. If the author uses the literal translation without understanding the real meaning that will be a disaster. In China, the original meaning is making medicine according to the routine ways. And it metaphors doing things according to the previous model. The translator uses domestication to give a specific meaning for target readers to make the meaning more clearly. Thus, the translator translates it into preparing himself for a dose of the same medicine. “东抓抓，西摸摸” is an Chinese oral speaking. It includes two location words: East and West. However, they have no specific meaning in these words. If the translator uses literal translation, it will make readers confused. Therefore, the translator use omission in its translation which omits the east the west to remain the key meaning. Finally, that is “grab hold here and clutch there”. In doing so, the translation can achieve the lexical ecology.

4.1.2 Syntactical level

Syntactical level is an important basis for texts and reflects different structures in different cultures. In the English translation of the sentence that describes folk culture in Tales of Hulan River, the translator has made many adaptation and selection for the sentence structure. It is intended to be adapted to the expressive structure of the language system of the target language. In this part, the author will conduct a syntactical comparative analysis between Chinese and English to explore how to realize the transformation on syntactical level.

Example3:

ST: 等下回给老太太跳大神的时候，顺便问一问大仙家再说吧。 天还未明，鸡先叫了。
TT: Wait till the next time we have the sorceress over for the old woman, and we’ll ask her opinion. Roosters crowed

Analysis: Form the context, this sentence is related to the spiritual folk. The sorceress is the superstitious activity to ask spirit to solve problems. The difference between English and Chinese is often reflected in the difference of expression habits at the level of language order. For example, English is used to have the result in front of the process, while Chinese is used to have the process in front of the result. Such differences make the reading habits of English and Chinese readers different. Therefore, the translation should be converted according to the translation language order. In this sentence, roosters crowed is the result, so the translator advance it at the beginning. In doing so, the translation can achieve the sentence ecology.

Example4:

ST: 说也奇怪，就是到死，也死得不凡，她死那年已经是八十二岁了。
TT: strange as it sounds, even her death was extraordinary. She died at the age of eighty-two.

Analysis: Form the context, this sentence is related to spiritual folk. It tells the story about Third Granny Zhou’s great-grandmother who had fallen under the power of a fox spirit and was in the throes of agony for a full three years, on the verge of death. Finally, she eat a whole, unpluck rooster—feathers, feet, and all—on a given star-filled night, then be covered with a quilt. She should be made to sweat it out until cockcrow of the following morning before allowing her to emerge from under the quilt. In doing these, the great-grandmother recover her health and she was not ill another day in her life. In this sentence, the second and third part both talk about death, the translator use combination to translate them into one sentence. In Chinese, people are prone to use short sentences, while in English, people prefers long sentences. In doing so, the translation can achieve the sentence ecology.

4.1.3 Discourse level

When translating the folk culture in Tales of Hulan River, translators pay close attention to the issue of stylistic correspondence between the source language and the target language during the translation process. Translators take the discourse as a unit to take notice of its internal vocabulary, phrases, sentences and other details as a whole to make it conforms to the style of the source language to the greatest extent. Although the material is a novel, the content contains many ancient Chinese poems and slangs related to folk culture. In terms of English-Chinese structure, the translator does not follow the ordinary rules: having more long sentences in English and more short sentences in Chinese, instead, remaining the original short sentence structure of Chinese poems to realize the discourse harmony.

Example5:

ST: 春眠不觉晓，处处闻啼鸟。
TT: I slept in spring not conscious of the dawn, But heard the gay birds chattering all around.
I remember, there was a storm at night, I know not how many
blossoms fell to the ground.

Analysis: This is a poetry named Spring Dawn and written by Meng Haoran (a famous poet in Tang Dynasty of ancient China). It expresses the feeling of homesickness. The fiction Tales of Hulan River is written in 1950s. In this fiction, the people in Hulan City also knows the famous poetries and sometimes talk about with their family. For example, granddad recite the poems to the author in the evening. It is the folk customs of life. Not only happened in this fiction, but also remain in our current society. This poetry is a five-character quatrain. It is an important format in Chinese poetry. Although English advocates long sentences, the type of poetry format is quite fixed. So, the author reserves the original structure using short sentences to translate it. In doing so, the translation can achieve the discourse ecology.

Example6:

ST: 重重叠叠上楼台，几度呼童扫不开。
        刚被太阳收拾去，又为明月送将来。

TT: Layer upon layer they cover the steps; The servant, summoned often, still cannot sweep them away. Taken from sight with the setting of the sun, The moon brings them back at the close of day.

Analysis: This is a poetry named Flower Shadow and written by Su Shi (a famous poet in Song Dynasty). This is an aria poem in which the poet expresses his feelings of wanting to make a difference but being helpless only by chanting the shadow of flowers. This situation happened in the fiction that the grandfather taught her granddaughter recite the poetry. From this scene, we can see the folk customs of life which make us feel warm. In this city, although a lot of uncultured and feudal people live in here, some of people are kind. This poetry is a seven-character quatrain. It is an important format in Chinese poetry. The translator remains the pattern of four sentences but not a long sentence, which shows that the translator respects the original style. In doing so, the translation can achieve the discourse ecology.

4.2 The Adaptation and Selection in Cultural Dimension

The adaptation and selection in cultural dimension means translators pay attention to the transmission and interpretation of bilingual cultural connotations in the translation process. The adaptation and selection of culture dimension focus on the differences in nature and content between the source culture and the target culture, so as to avoid misinterpreting. When translating the folk culture in Tales of Hulan River, the translation of English and Chinese culture cannot be completely corresponding due to different history, economy, environment and other factors. English has its own unique culture, and Chinese also has its own unique culture, so it is inevitable that there will be some cultural gaps when translators start their translation. Cultural gap is an important problem in Chinese-English translation. The author will combine the English translation of folk culture in Tales of Hulan River to conduct a comparative analysis of cultural gaps.

Example7:

ST: 只是跳秧歌，是为活人而不是为鬼预备的。跳秧歌是在正月十五，正是农闲的时候，趁着新年而化起装来，男人装女人，装得滑稽可笑。

TT: Only the harvest dances are performed for the benefit of the living and not for ghosts. These dances are performed on the fifteenth day of the new year, during the season of rest for those who work the land. They take advantage of the New Year’s festivities to masquerade themselves, with men making themselves up as women, presenting a comical scene that delights everyone.

Analysis: In this sentence, “跳秧歌” is a kind of spiritual folk. It is a special activity in Northeast China. These dances are performed on the fifteenth day of the new year, during the season of rest for those who work the land. Compared with other superstitious activities, it is the rather healthier and happier activity in this novel. In foreign countries, they don’t have this activity. So, the translator can’t use the corresponding words to translate it. Therefore, the translator gives some explanation to translate it. Firstly, it shows the type. It is a form of dance. Secondly, it shows the aim. The aim is to celebrate the harvest and to show the happiness that people feel. Thus “the harvest dances” is a quite good translation. In doing so, the translation can achieve the cultural adaptation.

4.3 The Adaptation and Selection in Communicative Dimension

“The adaptation and selection in communicative dimension means translators pay attention to bilingual communicative intent in the translation process. And this kind of adaptation requires translators to focus on the communicative level, in addition to the conversion of linguistic information and the transmission of cultural connotation, and pay attention to the things whether the communicative intent of the source text is reflected in the translated text”. In the translation of folk culture in Tales of Hulan River, there are many
transformations of communicative intentions in order to make the readers fully understand the content of the article. Translator has made a lot of logical transformations in the translation of folk culture to achieve the communicative intention of the source texts.

Example 9:

ST: 于是议论纷纷了，有的说是因农业学堂设在庙里边，冲了龙王爷，龙王爷要降大雨淹死这孩子。
TT: Someone said that it happened because the Agricultural School was located in the Dragon King Temple, which angered the venerable Dragon King. The Dragon King had caused the heavy downpour in order to drown the child.

Analysis: From the context, this sentence tells us the spiritual folk about Dragon King. In ancient Chinese legend, Dragon King is charge of rainfall. When people want to have a rainy day, they will pray to Dragon King. Chinese uses more sentences, the logic is always hidden or omitted. However, English sentences like obvious and clear description. So, they are inclined to use some conjunctions to show the logic. In this sentence, Because the Dragon King Temple was destroyed, the Dragon would drown the child. Therefore, the translator uses the amplification “in order to” to show the clear logic. In doing so, the translation can achieve the communicative adaptation.

Example 10:

ST: 老胡家跳大神，就实在跳得奇。用大缸给团圆媳妇洗漆，而且是当众就洗的。
TT: The dance of the sorceress at the home of the Hu family was a novel event, as was the bath that the child bride was given in a large vat in full view of everyone.

Analysis: From the context, this sentence describes the spiritual folk about the dance of the sorceress. In the ritual, the sorceress tells the child bride’s mother-in-law to use a large vat to bath the child bride in view of everyone so that the child bride can get rid of the illness and exorcism. In Chinese, the source language, we can know there are some potential logic connections between these two sentences. But it doesn’t show their logic words literally. While English is a kind of language that must make their logic words appear in the sentences. Therefore, the translator makes an amplification in the translation, which adds a conjunction word “as”. In these two sentences. The first sentence shows the result that the dance of the sorceress at the home of the Hu family make the author feel strange and novel, while the second sentence shows why the author feels strange and novel. In doing this, the translation can be easily understood by the readers from target language. In doing so, the translation can achieve the communicative adaptation.

Example 11:

ST: 粉房旁边的那小偏房里，还住着一家赶车的， 那家喜欢跳大神，常常就打起鼓来， 呼喝咧咧唱起来了。
TT: A carter and his family lived in one of the side rooms attached to the noodle mill. The dance of the sorceress was frequently performed for this family’s benefit, so drumbeats and chants often arose from that place.

Analysis: From the context, this is one of sentences about the belief folk. They make the dance of the sorceress in Hulan City. In this sentence, there are five clauses as well as three sense groups. The first and the second clauses are the first sense group, which describe the facts that there is a household. The third clause is the second sense group, which tells us the household likes the dance of the sorceress. The fourth and the fifth clauses are the third sense group, which shows the behaviors in the dance of the sorceress. Thus, the third sense group is the result of the second sense group. That is to say, the second sense group is the reason, while the third sense group is the result. Because Chinese is implicit and its sentence is always short, it always hides the logic words. However, English is explicit and its sentence is always long. Thus, the translator makes an amplification in the translation, which adds a conjunction word “so” to show the result. In doing so, the translation can achieve the communicative adaptation.

5. Summary

This essay analyzes the folk culture in the English translation of Tales of Hulan River from the perspective of three-dimensional transformations of eco-translationology, and then the writer comes up with some strategies and translation methods during these process, which are summarized as follows:

At the level of the adaptation and selection in linguistic dimension, the analysis is divided into lexical ecology, sentence ecology and discourse ecology. Firstly, from the perspective of lexical ecology, translators should not be restricted by the original part of speech, but should be transformed into an appropriate part of speech according to the coherence of the context. When dealing with Chinese four-character words, translators should not only look at their literal meaning, but also understand their implicit meanings and then translate them appropriately. Besides, the translation of function words can be properly discarded, and try to keep translation concise. Secondly, From the perspective of syntactical level, translators should understand and master the structural differences between English and Chinese, and apply the theory into practice. English is mostly long sentences, while Chinese are mostly short sentences. Therefore, in the process of translating from Chinese to English, it is necessary to adjust the structure and grasp the relationship between sentences and sentences to achieve readers’ understanding of the texts. Thirdly, from the perspective of discourse level, translators should focus on the conversion of the original language style, respect the original language style and make a reasonable balance between English and Chinese.

At the level of the adaptation and selection in cultural dimension, translators should identify the mutual cultural deficiencies between English and Chinese, accumulate some expressions in different cultures, so that translators can correctly understand the original text, and correctly convey the real meaning of source texts. In the face of cultural gaps, Translators can adopt two methods, one is descriptive translation, which briefly explains the customs that do not exist in the target language, and translates the core connotation.
The other is substitutive translation, which is to find things with similar attributes in the target language for alternative translation.

At the level of adaptation and selection in the communicative dimension, translators should consider the communicative nature of the source texts. Translators can ensure successful communication by focusing on the correctness of the communication of the text at the logical level. The correctness of logic is a necessary condition for reader to understand the texts. It is the premise of communication that the translation conforms to the logical thinking of the target language readers. Translators can analyze whether the logic is clearly expressed according to the contexts of the source text. Translators can use the method of transforming logical relations and adding logical conjunctions to improve the clarity of expression.

Eco-translatology is a relatively new theory in the translation field, which requires translators to think multi-dimensionally and learns to adapt to choices in the translation process, so as to achieve the best translation standard that is the highest degree of adaptation and selection. Folk culture is a part of traditional culture. Applying eco-translatology theory to direct the translation of folk culture is conducive to increasing exchanges and promoting the diversity of cultures. How to apply eco-translatology theory to make folk culture translation reach the best translation standards still needs some further explorations and researches.

Acknowledgements

This research has been supported by the Project of Graduate Student Innovation Fund of the International Oil and Gas Resource Area Language and Culture Research Center, Southwest Petroleum University in 2021 under grant No. YQCX2021010.

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