



## On Cultural Differences in the Two English Versions of *A Dream of Red Mansions*

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### Abstract

The famous Chinese classic novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* has two complete English translation versions; one was translated by Chinese translator Yang and the other by foreign translator David Hawkes. By comparing the materials cited from the two different English renditions, this paper considers to study on the cultural differences in them, especially the functions of translators' different cultural backgrounds in translating. It argues that the variations of translators' cultural backgrounds are often the reasons of differences in translation versions. In other words, translation is invisibly affected by translator's aim, ideology and national psychology etc.

**Keywords:** *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Translation, Cultural differences, Intercultural communication

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 *The Chinese classical novel A Dream of Red Mansions*

Among the Chinese classics, *A Dream of Red Mansions* has been most widely read and studied by the general public and scholars since the later part of the 18th century. This work vividly and realistically unveils a pure world of that dynasty. Besides its mythical beginning, more than 400 human characters come to life in the Jia palace throughout the one hundred and twenty chapters of this book.

The author Cao Xue-qin was born in the early part of the 18th century during the period of Emperor Kong Xi and died in the Ching dynasty. Historical research reveals that the personal experiences of the author were striking similar to the events setting of this novel.

As the time goes by, this novel has been translated into more than twenty languages with over one hundred translation versions, and been read and loved by millions of people from all walks of life all around the world. It especially appeals to young people because the entire antagonist in the story is young as well. There are six English translation versions. Four of them are translations of selected chapters and only two are complete versions.

In this book even those chambermaids with rather low social status are given distinctive and unforgettable personalities, besides them, the poems of these characters are worth mentioning. The author's literary feats enable him to weave poetry by presenting their inner woes and shadowing the future developments of the plot as well as the fate of the books characters.

This book could also enable the English readers to get a deep understanding of the rise and decline of a prominent family with a fresh impression of old Chinese culture of that time.

#### 1.2 *The two complete English versions of A Dream of Red Mansions*

*A Dream of Red Mansions* is one complete English version translated by Yang Hsien -Yi and Gladys Yang. They were published by Foreign Language Press, Beijing, China in 1978 in three volumes.

The other complete English version is *The Story of the Stone*, because the hero of this novel was born holding a precious stone in his mouth as the human form of the discard ethereal stone. The whole book of this version concludes five volumes, and the first three volumes were translated by David Hawkes, published in 1973, 1977 and 1980 respectively. The last two volumes, which contained the last forty chapters, were translated by John Minford, the son-in-law of David

Hawkes, and were published in 1982 and 1986 separately.

These two versions are preferred as the most popular English versions, and at the same time remain as the only two complete translations as well.

## 2. The relation of culture and translation

As the person between original work and reader, a translator must transfer all kinds of information of original work, either linguistic or cultural. At the same time, he should take readers' psychology into consideration and try his best to let readers of translation version have the same, or at least, similar feeling with reader of original work.

Traditionally, translation is to render something from one language to another language, including the rendering of differences in language structures. However, another problem should be paid attention to in this process: the cultural differences between source language and target language. This paper tries to argue that translation is not merely selecting equivalent words, but incarnating culture of target language at the same time.

As we referred previously, the two English versions were translated by one Chinese translator and one foreign translator respectively. Nida has said: "The rule of language within a culture and the influence of the culture on the meanings of words and idioms are so pervasive that scarcely any text can be adequately understood without careful consideration of its cultural background." (Nida, *Language, Culture, and Translating*) In this way, varied cultural backgrounds may lead to various translations. By comparing materials cited from the two English renditions, this paper considers to study on the functions of cultural differences in translating, in other words, what role was played by cultural backgrounds in this progress?

By citing and comparing examples on various aspects, this paper also tries to show that translation is an action of intercultural exchange, which bridges up the gap between two different kinds of cultures.

## 3. Cultural differences in the two different translations of *A Dream of Red Mansions*

### 3.1 Thought patterns

In the same way with culture, thought patterns vary from one to another. According to the diagram, (Robert B. Kaplan, *Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-cultural Education*), an English paragraph normally follows a straight line of development; however, Chinese classical paragraph tends to follow a circular line of development. This shows that each culture has its own special way of thinking. Interpreting Chinese into English is not only a matter of rearranging words and word groups in a sentence. If words and word groups of source language don't fit together in the same way as the words of another language do, the order also needs a change. Besides this, the same words and symbols may create different images in different cultures, in other words, we can also say that one's thinking mode can hardly divide from his culture and language.

(1) "Nǐ mèimei yuǎn lù cái lái, shēnzǐ yòu ruò, yě cái quàn zhù le, kuài bié zài tí le."

(Disān huí. p30)

"So don't reopen that subject."

(Trans, the yangs Vol. I p39)

"So let's have no more of this."

(Trans, Hawkes Vol. I p92)

It could be found that Prof. Hawkes's translation is in the order of English, however, Prof. Yang's translation structure is very similar to oriental Chinese sentence structure. Under this occasion, Prof. Hawkes's translation is certainly the one which is more readable and acceptable to foreign readers, and remains the original stylistic color consequently.

### 3.2 Values

Values are expressions of what is considered good or evil, beautiful or ugly, and right or wrong. Values are also standards being used by people to judge the actions of ourselves and others around us. (Charles O. Ellenbaum & Gail B. Ellenbaum)

Different cultural individuals might have distinctiveness on values. If applied to translation, these differences in ideology could be reflected as differences in language áexpressing, because language could reflect people's images on culture.

(2) Bǐshí Dàiyù zài chuāng xià duì jìng shūzhuāng, tīng Bǎoyù shuō shàngxué qù, yīn xiào dào: Hǎo ! Zhè yí qù ,kěshì yào 'chánguāngzhèguì' le ! Wǒbùnéng shòng nǐ le."

(Dǐjú huí)

"She was sitting before her mirror by the window and smiled when he told her that he was off to school. 'Good,' she said, 'so you're going to pluck fragrant osmanthus in the palace of the moon. I'm sorry I can't see you off.'"

(Trans, the yangs Vol. I , p134)

“He found her by the window making herself up at the mirror. Her answer to his announcement that he was off to begin school was smiling but perfunctory: ‘Good, *I wish you every success. I’m sorry I can’t see you off.*’ ”

(Trans, Hawkes Vol. I , p149)

The Chinese idiom “chángōngzhégù” means to win in the imperial examinations. According to an Chinese old tale, there was a cherry bay in the moon, so winning in the imperial examinations is expressed as “chángōngzhégù”. Prof. Yang literally translated this literary quotation to “pluck fragrant osmanthus in the palace of the moon”, as foreign reader may not understand if there are no notes for this idiom. Based on sociolinguistic points, different scopes of sociolinguistics may use various ways to refer to the same thing. Here Prof. Hawkes used adaptation and translated it to “I wish you every success”.

Concerning the sentence “Wǒ bùnéng sòng nǐ le”, both versions are the same: “I’m sorry I can’t see you off”, they both added “I’m sorry” to cater to English readers and achieve successful inter-cultural communications.

(3) “Jiǎmǔ Wáng fūrén děng yīn sù xǐ Lǐ Wán xiánhuì ,qiě niánqīng shǒu jié, líng rén jìngfú ,jīn jiàn tā guǎshěn lái le, biàn bùkěn jiào tā wàitou qù zhù. Nà shěnmǔ suī shífēn bùkěn, wúnài jiǎmǔ zhīyì bùcóng, zhǐděi dài zhe Lǐ Wén Lǐ Qì zài dào xiāngcūn zhù xià le.”

(Disishíjiǔ huí.p607)

“Because the Lady Dowager and Lady Wang appreciated Li Wan’s good qualities and her admirable conduct since her husband’s untimely death. They would not hear of her widowed aunt staying anywhere but in their house. So although most reluctant to impose on them, on the old lady’s insistence *Li Wan’s aunt had to move into Paddy-Sweet Cottage with her two daughters.* ”

(Trans, the yangs Vol. II , p128)

“Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang esteemed Li Wan as a good and virtuous young woman who, having lost her husband at an early age bore widowhood with fortitude and restraint. Now that this widowed aunt had arrived, they refused to hear of her taking lodgings outside, and thought the good lady made many polite efforts to decline, insisted that her and her two daughters, *Li Wen and Li Qi, should move into Sweet-rice Village and stay there with Li Wan at the family expense.* ”

(Trans, Hawkes Vol. II , p473)

Following the original text, Prof. Yang used literal translation and reveals the politeness and indirectness of Chinese discourse habit. Another kind of Chinese national psychology is also reflected—avoiding talking about money—which is a custom dated from old time.

Concurrently, Prof. Hawkes added “stay there with Li Wan at the family expense” from cultural view. In westerners’ conception of value, money is a powerful thing and a measure of success, for example, they will make out bills clearly even between full brothers. Based on this cultural difference, background information should be provided to English readers to explain why Grandmother Jia insisted in Li Wan’s aunt’s moving into Sweet-rice Village and “stay there with Li Wan at the family expense”.

### 3.3 Tradition, customs and life style

(4) “Liǎngbiān kào mén yì xiǎozhuō: Lǐ Wán hé fēngjiě ,xūshè zhuòwèi ,liǎng rén jiē bù gǎn zuò, zhǐ zài Jiǎmǔ Wángfūrén liǎng zhuō shàng cìhòu.”

(Disānshíbā huí.p461-462)

“...and the small one near the door on the west for Li Wan and His-feng The seat sat this were unoccupied, however, as they were waiting on the tables of the Lady Dowager and Lady Wang. ”

(Trans, the yangs Vol. I , p461)

“A little table was laid for Xi-feng and Li wan on the west side, of the doorway, but this was only for form’s sake, since both of them remained on their feet in order to wait on the other two tables.”

(Trans, Hawkes Vol. II , p243)

Though both translation versions are faithful, here Prof. Hawkes’s translation sounds more interesting and expressive. In Hawkes’s translation, the cultural words “xūshè zhuòwèi” was rendered into “this was only for form’s sake”, which gives us an impression of Hawkes’s remarkable mastery of Chinese. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, when Jia family gave a dinner party, it is true that they did according to Chinese old customs. Based on *The Customs of A Dream of Red Mansions* (<<Hōnglóumèng fēngsútān>>), the most respectable one will sit at the head of the table, with two people sitting on each side, and at the other end of the table no seat will be set, for the sake of serving food.

(5) “Jì yào xué zuòshī,nǐ jiù bài wǒ wéi shī.”

(Dìsìhíbā huí,p597)

“If you want to write poetry you must acknowledge me as your tutor.”

(Trans, the yangs Vol. II , p115)

“You can make your kowtow and become my pupil if you like.”

(Trans, Hawkes Vol. II , p456)

As an old custom in China, “bàishi” means making actual kowtow to one’s teacher. Through translating Hawkes reveals this historical background to the target readers, while Prof. Yang’s version gives us a flavor of modern sense which seems not quite go hand in hand with the original.

(6) “Nǐ búyòng pà tā,děng wǒ xìngzi shànglai,bǎ zhè cùguānzi dǎ ge xīlàn,tā cái rēnde wǒne.”

(Dìèrshíyī huí)

“Don’t be afraid of her. One of these days when I really lose my temper, I’m going to give that vinegary bitch a good beating to show her who’s master here.”

(Trans, the yangs Vol. I , p215)

“One of these days when I get my temper up, I’m going to lay into that jealous bitch and break every bone in her body. Then perhaps she’ll know who’s master round here.”

(Trans, Hawkes Vol. II , p145)

As a thing existed in both eastern and western, vinegary refers to someone who is narrow-minded and jealous in Chinese culture, but is used to describe somebody who is sharp-tempered in the western world. Probably because of this, Prof. Yang and Prof. Hawkes rendered this sentence in different ways.

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Xi-feng is famous for her cruelty. She would not let her husband have any connect with any women except herself, so “cùguānzi” refers to her. Here Prof. Hawkes leaves out the meaning of “cù” but directly shows the internal meaning—jealous. Referring to dictionary, vinegary means unkind, bitter and sour-tempered (*Oxford Advanced Learning’s English-Chinese Dictionary*), and this explanation is corresponding to Xi-feng’s personality. Furthermore, it holds the image of vinegary in the meantime. Prof. Yang’s version is more faithful to the original text.

### 3.4 Religious differences

The center of Chinese traditional religions is Confucianism; while the counterpart in western traditional religions is Christians. These two religions represent different cultures’ concepts of rules.

(7) “Shirén dōu xiǎo shénxiān hǎo.”

(Dìyī huí)

“All men long to be immortals.”

(Trans, the yangs Vol. I , p16)

“Men all know that salvation should be won.”

(Trans, Hawkes Vol. I , p63)

(8) “Móushì zài rén,chéngshì zài tiān.”

(Dìliù huí)

“Man proposes; heaven disposes.”

(Trans, the yangs Vol. I , p90)

“Man proposes; God disposes.”

(Trans, Hawkes Vol. I , p152)

“Shénxiān”and“tiān”are basic concepts of Chinese Taoism, so Prof. Yang literally translated them to “immortals” and “heaven”, which reserved the cultural color of words. Thus it’s very faithful to the original text. In the meanwhile, Prof. Hawkes found two equivalent concepts in Christian: “salvation” and “God”, which are more readable and understandable for English readers. Here, concepts in target language which are similar to that in source language could be found, but could lead to the loss of the religious color of the original.

(9) “ Liú lǎolao dào:‘āmítuófó! zhè quānzhàng le sāozǐ fāngbiàn le’.”

(Dìliù huí)

“Buddha be praised! I’m most grateful for your help, sister.”

(Trans, the yangs Vol. I , p93)

“Bless you, my dear, for being such a help.”

(Trans, Hawkes Vol. I , p156)

Different religious colors are revealed in the two interpretations. Prof. Yang’s version is very formal with the color of Buddhism, while the other version is not so formal with the color of Christians. From the point of linguistics, we can find that Prof. Hawkes’s translation is easier for English readers to accept.

### 3.5 Cultural differences

(10) “Mò xiàng dōngfēng yuàn bié lí.”

(Dìershìèr huí)

“Blame not the east wind for this separation.”

(Trans, the yangs Vol. I , p324)

“And on the wind I drift off broken hearted.”

(Trans, Hawkes Vol. II , p448)

(11) “Chàngwàng xīfēng bào mēn sī. ”

(Disānshíbā huí)

“I gaze around in the west wind, sick at heart.”

(Trans, the yangs Vol. I , p559)

“The autumn wind that through the knotgrass blows.”

(Trans, Hawkes Vol. II , p250)

(12) “Duìlǐ dōngfēng lǐ, zhǔrén yīng jiě lián.”

(Dìshíbā huí)

“Facing each other in the soft east wind”

(Trans, the yangs Vol. I , p261)

“Their mistress, standing in the soft summer breeze”

(Trans, Hawkes Vol. I , p370)

“Dōngfēng” and “xīfēng” are words with Chinese culture flavor. Under Prof. Yang’s translation, “dōngfēng” is literally rendered into “east wind” and “xīfēng” into “west wind”, but are freely translated into “summer breeze” and “autumn wind” by Prof. Hawkes. What’s the reason of these differences?

Different ways of looking at the original text and different methods of translation are indicated. Prof. Yang’s translation primarily focuses upon the semantic content of the source text; meanwhile the comprehension and response of receptors are focused on Prof. Hawkes’s version.

Owing to the differences of geographical positions, some words refer to different conceptual meanings. To a Chinese, “dōngfēng” refers to warm and wettish wind blowing from the Pacific Ocean in spring and summer, and often connects with spring in poems to create poetic images. Take the lines from “The Romance of Western Brower” written by Wang shifu(Wāng Shífū) for example, “Kě zhèngshì, rén zhí cáncún pú jùn dōng, mén yǎn chóngguān xiāosì zhōng; huāluò shuǐ liú hōng, xiánchóu wànzhōng, wúyǔ xiào dōngfēng.” Other examples : “Dōngfēng fā méi liǔ, wàn wù shēng chūnguāng” (Tāng Dézōng) and “èryuè èrri jiāngshàng xíng, dōngfēng rìnuǎn wén chuīshēng” (Lǐ Shāngyǐn). Through these examples we can see that east wind equals to spring wind in Chinese culture. Moreover, “xīfēng” is always associated with late autumn, as an example: “Bì yú tān, huáng yè dì, xīfēng jīn, běi yàn nán fēi, xiǎo lái shuǐ rǎn shuāng lín zuì, zōngshì lí rén lèi.” (Xīxiāngjì)

On the other hand, to English reader, “west wind” is warm and wettish wind blowing from the Atlantic Ocean which signs the spring’s coming. Such as the famous quotation from *Ode to the West Wind*: “If Winter comes, can spring be far behind?” (Percy Bysshe Shelly). In the similar way, “east wind” is associated with summer to an English reader.

From the information given above, it could be acknowledged that the meanings of “dōngfēng” and “xīfēng” are just the oppositions in Chinese and Western cultures, as a result, referred to Prof. Yang’s translation, if “dōngfēng” is simply translated into “east wind”, “xīfēng” into “west wind”, a big misunderstanding will occur to English readers.

In this occasion, the version of Prof. Hawkes is more faithful to the original text, and more readable to English readers; the process of inter-cultural communicating and bridging up culture difference is also successful.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, two English versions of *A Dream of Red Mansions* are compared through analyzing materials on the following five aspects: thought patterns, values, tradition, customs, life style, religious differences and culture differences. Just as Nida says, "The meaning of verbal symbols on any and every level depends on the culture of language community", language is an indispensable part of culture; interactional and interdependent are the relationship between language and culture. As a complex communicational activity involved two languages and two cultures, the influence of cultural differences to translation is unavoidable, and we can see the great function of cultural differences through former analysis. To conclude, cultural differences should be paid special attention in translating practice, and the translator should be the master of both source language and target language.

On the other hand, the aim of translator also affects interpreting. Prof. Hawkes's aim is to let English readers understand more easily; however Prof. Yang's motivation is to deliver Chinese traditional culture to the world outside. In this situation, English readers are tending to read Prof. Hawkes' work. In translating practices, culture differences should always be taken into account, and many translating theories, such as literally translation and free translation, could be used to achieve the success of intercultural communication.

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