

Reflections on Cultural Differences between American and China on Translation

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Abstract

Through making a brief comment on the relationship between the culture studies and translation, the essay contrasts the cultural differences between Western countries, especial America and China, and explores the foreign cultural influence on Chinese traditional culture brought by the translations.

Keywords: Culture, Translation, Influence

1. Introduction of translation and culture

The twentieth century has been called the 'age of translation' or 'reproduction'. Yet the study focus of translation has been changing from translation practice to translation theory. A translation study, though connecting closely with others fields, yet having a relative autonomy, appears as an independent subject. The increasingly interdisciplinary nature of translation studies has multiplied theories of translation.

Translation studies contains these two kinds of meanings: in its narrow sense dealing with literal translation aiming at turning the content in one language into another language, and in a broad sense exploring in turning the cultural connotation in one language into another cultural form. The former is to a large extent restricted to the yoke linguistic form, while the latter is of greater tension of dynamic interpretation. Jacobson divided translation into three types: intralingual translation or rewording, interlingual translation and intersemiotic translation. (Note 1)

Culture, according to the definition of CiHai (the Great Dictionary), in a narrow sense refers to the social ideology and its corresponding institutions and organizations, while in a broad sense refers to the material and spiritual wealth. It is sometimes regarded as 'ways of life' and 'something that binds people together'. The term culture can cover a lot of areas, such as literature, art, education and science etc. which a society usually possesses exclusively.

2. Inter-relationship between cultures in translation

2.1 Translation and cultural transmission

Translation involves turning the source language into the target language, while it is commonly believed that language serves as a vehicle of culture, hence when translating a language, the relevant cultural translation is more or less involved. (as shown by Figure 1) Language may be seen as a part of a culture.

Insert Figure 1 Here

C1-cultural background of SL

C2-cultural background of TL

M1-original information on SL

M2-information on TL

S1-resource of information

S2-resouce of information (translator)

R1-receiver of information in SL

R2- receiver of information in TL

The source language and the target language are just semantically equivalent, which means in all translations loss of information or addition of information (from M1 to M2) will occur, so will culture (from C1to C2). The so-called equivalence, from the view of Nida, is first on the respect of meaning, and then comes the style.

2.2 Cultural differences between western countries and China

It is said the 21st century is a multi-culture society. The resources of conflicts do not lie in the ideology, but in culture. With the development of reform and opening up, China is taking on a new look in the world. Culture varies in different countries. There exists lots of differences between China and other countries, such as those between American and China.(Figure 2 shows the degree of the cultural difference)

Insert Figure 2 Here

Once Zhang Dongpan, a Chinese-American, in 1994 drew a conclusion on the sharp differences between Chinese traditional culture and American culture as following which gives us a vivid picture how different they are:

- (1) American culture emphasizes 'active mastery' in the person-nature relationship, whereas Chinese culture emphasizes 'passive acceptance' of fate by seeking harmony with nature.
- (2) American culture tends to be concerned with external experiences and the world of things, whereas traditional Chinese culture emphasizes inner experiences of meaning and feeling.
- (3) American culture is characterized by an open view of the world, emphasizing change and development, whereas traditional Chinese culture was typified by a closed world view, prizing stability and harmony.
- (4) American culture places primary faith in rationalism and is oriented toward future whereas traditional Chinese culture rested upon kinship ties and tradition with a past orientation.
- (5) American culture emphasizes horizontal dimensions of interpersonal relationship, whereas traditional Chinese culture placed more weight on vertical interpersonal relationship.
- (6) American culture values the individual personality, whereas traditional Chinese culture weighed heavily a person's duties to family, clan, and state.

2.3 Translation brings a new culture

It is easy for people to deal with those similar culture fields (we may call it universal), by basing on his experience. As for those different ones, however, people often take it for granted they guess from the literal words, which lead them go to the wrong side. In the translation studies the former is called the positive transfer of culture, while the latter is called the negative transfer of culture. During the process of translating it is hard to find a proper expression corresponding to the source language, or even it cannot be expressed in the target language. What a translation should do is to transplant a new culture to fill the culture gap, which inevitably bring about a cultural war.

As we have known, Chinese culture, as a typical oriental culture, is sharply distinctive from American culture, which stands as an occidental culture. There are great differences in value standard, aesthetic orientation, religious belief, culture image, geography and way of living between them. Chinese translation often perfect the American culture by covering the bad one in the book, movies, TV programs, and internet, so that it often gives us a wrong impression that everything in American culture is better than ours. Translation, though, is a kind of cross-cultural activity or a dialogue between cultures; in fact it is hard for the two cultures to stand in an equal position. So cultural exchanges and has a dialogue unequally, such as those between strong culture and weak culture or between central and peripheral culture. Fredric Jimson said, 'in cultural transmission, a group shows respect to and accept another group by borrowing its culture to convey a collective admire and acknowledge the authority. That is why they borrow and imitate the other's cultural expressions' (Note 2).

2.4 The great impact of foreign culture on China

In the late Qing period, from the Opium War to the 1911 revolution, China absorbed the initial impact of western arms, manufactures, science and culture. The western literature was introduced into China on the evidence of translations. Having to overcome Chinese assumptions of superiority, the perception that the west had a literature worth notice grew only gradually. It was not until the very end of the 19th century that a translation of a western novel (*La dame aux camelas*) achieved popular acclaim. More translation fictions were published than original fictions. From then on more cultures pour constantly into China. China changes rapidly. Facing the culture invasion we are at loss.

Nowadays more and more youth like to follow fashion, mainly influenced by the western countries, for instance, they would like to eat in a Macdonald's rather than in a Chinese restaurant; they dyed their hairs in yellow; they like to use foreign products; they like to celebrate the foreign festivals; they pursue the way of foreign living. They are losing themselves. Introduced by the translations of foreign countries we keep on understanding and learning the foreign culture, yet we are also unconsciously reshaping our own traditional culture. We are changing our way of thinking and living. The effect of foreign culture on our traditional one is so strong and widespread, especially to those young generations that it is difficult to handle with. Their minds are invaded or filled by western culture, and they could not help standing completely on the side of western camp. Now we are facing a hard problem of cultural invasion, which is more dangerous than a military invasion. Under the influence of other cultures, it is easy for them to betray their own tradition, and weaken their wills. As for the current serious situation, lot scholars put cultural safe and cultural protection forward. Yet as a country in the world we have to communicate with other countries, thus are affected by other cultures. Any culture exists in relation to another culture; any culture has its own strong and weak point, and any culture cannot avoid

undergoing such periods as germination, development, prime of its life and decline. So no culture could always dominates over world culture. No matter whether it is a strong or a weak culture there is no such thing as one-orientational influence of one culture or penetration into another culture (Note 3). So it is not necessary to separate us from other. The most important is what kind of attitude we should hold toward the foreign culture. Our traditional culture, which embraces considerable philosophical theories, has long been ignored or looked down upon, not by others but by ourselves. We should not deny that it nourishes us, otherwise that means to forget what is close at hand and seek what is far afield. It is a basic tool to arm our minds. We should keep it in our mind that we should try to absorb the excellent culture, and eliminate the bad one of foreign countries on the basis of full understanding of our own. We should have the eye to tell the good from the bad. We must make a clear understanding of our cultural problem. We are not the man of Qi who feared that the sky might fall.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, it is mainly the translation, which carries the responsibility to transmit and communicate the culture, as well as a means to protect our brilliant culture. What to be translated, how to translate and how to translate have a close connection with the future of a nation. In a word the culture studies in translation plays a crucial role since it may bring the destruction or prosperity of a country.

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Notes

- Note 1. Wang Ning, 2001, Translation Study in the context of Cultural Study, "Foreign Culture and Research", Wu Youfu, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Note 2. Fredric Jimson, 1998, "Delight: Culture and Politics", Chinese Social Science Research Press, P. 28.
- Note 3. Lin Zhang, 1999, On the Basic Research of Translation Study, "Foreign Language", P. 63.

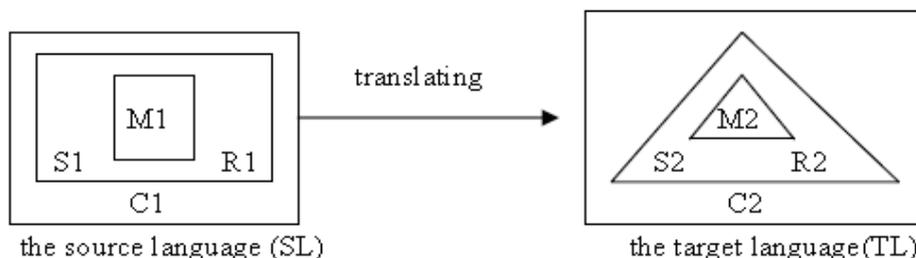


Figure 1. Translation variants

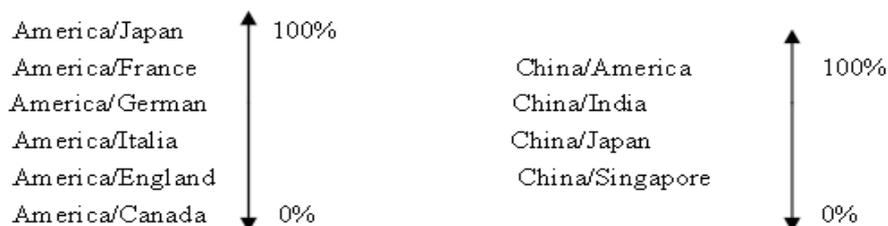


Figure 2. Degrees of the cultural difference