

Evolution of Cultural Context in China and Its Influence on Domestication and Foreignization Strategies in Literary Translation

Jiayuan Li

Department of Fundamental Education, Chengdu Agricultural College, Chengdu, 611130, China

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Abstract: Translation activities are conducted within and thus significantly influenced by certain cultural contexts. Domestication and foreignization are two general strategies to deal with cultural differences during literary translation. As China has developed from a highly closed country to a more opened-up one over the last century or so, the cultural contexts in China have evolved accordingly, and the dominant literary translation strategy in China has consequently been shifted from domestication to foreignization.

1. Introduction

“Language serves two important cultural functions. First, it is the means of preserving culture; and, second, it is the medium of transmitting culture to new generation”. [1] Language and culture are unavoidably closely related to each other, and for this reason, the translation activities, which involve at least two languages, always take place between different cultures and within certain cultural contexts, which, in turn, influence the translation activities themselves.

In a narrow sense, context means the words, phrases, segments and sentences surrounding a specific word. In a broader sense, for translators, context is the environment and setting in which a translation is conducted. Bronisław Kasper Malinowski was the first scholar who coined the terms “context of situation” and “context of culture” as early as in 1923, and believed that “the whole way of life” (cultural context) had to be borne in mind in interpreting an utterance. Many other scholars, such as J. R. Firth and M. A. K. Halliday, held similar views towards this concept.

“The cultural context in which human communication occurs is perhaps the most defining influence on human interaction. Culture provides the overall framework wherein humans learn to organize their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in relation to their environment”. [2] Elements such as individualism – collectivism, high- and low-context communication, value orientations, power distance, weak and strong uncertainty avoidance, etc. are all under the general term of “cultural context”. They are unconsciously displayed in our attitudes, values and behavior. In most cases, these elements affect our behavior unconsciously and yet fundamentally, influencing our cognitive, affective, behavior and also linguistic choices, and they remain relatively constant and stable over a long period of time and are integrated together organically.

2. Domestication and Foreignization

During literary translation activities, as a type of human behavior, translators face the choice of adaptation to or rebellion against his own cultural context, i.e. domestication or foreignization, when confronted by cultural differences. When remarking on a lecture of the German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher made in 1813, the American Italian scholar – Lawrence Venuti proposed the terms of “domesticating method/domestication” and “foreignizing method/foreignization” in his monograph *The Translators’ Invisibility* [3]. Compared with the traditional terms of “literal translation” and “free translation”, domestication and foreignization have taken on aesthetical and cultural elements, and their dichotomy is an extension of literal and free translation, including but going beyond the originally linguistic level.

With domesticating methods, the translator aims to render the general idea of the source text to the target language reader and simultaneously eliminate the cultural differences between the source

text and the target text, so domestication is “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home” [3]. Some cultural factors specific to the source language culture may be omitted or bypassed, or replaced with some equivalents in the translation text. Translation works with domestication methods read smooth to readers, without causing some cultural difference problems in reading. By contrast, with foreignizing methods, the translator aims to render the cultural differences from the source text to the target text, trying to deliver both semantic meanings and cultural factors from the source text, so foreignization is “an ethnodeviant pressure on the values” of the target language “to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad” [3]. Foreignization can be done at the levels of specific words, expressions, literary genres, or literary themes, and it helps the target language to absorb beneficial factors from the source language and enrich and develop the target language. Moreover, “foreignizing translation can better foster the cultural communication and improve the target readers’ understanding of the foreign cultures” [4].

Take the Chinese idiom of “san ge chou pi jiang ding ge zhu ge liang” for example. With a foreignizing method, an English translator may translate it into “three ordinary cobblers are as smart as the talented strategist – Zhuge Liang)”, which delivers the original Chinese cultural differences but sounds quite strange to Chinese readers, while a more domesticating method may render it as “two heads are better than one”, which is a more idiomatic expression for English readers. This is an example of the difference between domestication and foreignization in translation at a low linguistic level.

3. Literary Translation during China’s First Peak of Literary Translation

Translation of foreign literary works into China had been quite rare by the 1870s, and the first peak of such translation activities appeared in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, mostly in the 1900s. The last decades of the feudal empire saw dramatic social changes in China as well as in many other countries: some imperialist countries thrived, while others became colonies. The Chinese people lost confidence in the feudal government based on thousands of years’ civilization after a series of defeats in wars and signing of unequal treaties. They desired to search for truth to revitalize the old nation because the traditional Chinese classics could not provide them with this. With the intention of learning from progressive experiences and educating the common people, like that in the slogan of “learning foreign strong points to check them”, the translators introduced books on technology, sociology into China, and subsequently those of literary works, of which popular novels, especially criminal, adventurous and romantic novels, constituted the majority.

The domestication-focused strategy appeared noticeable during this first literary translation peak in China. First, in terms of translation language, “most translators, except for a few, insisted on adopting classical Chinese instead of the vernacular, despite the thriving vernacular campaign in the late Qing Dynasty” [5]. Such was the case with the renowned translator Yan Fu, Liang Qichao, and Lin Shu, the latter of whom produced large numbers of translation works depending on other’s oral interpretation. Yan Fu and Lin Shu were the pioneers in the translation activities during that period. They embarked on an increase in translation and a new peak in Chinese translation history. Yan’s famous translations include T. Henry Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays*, Adam Smith’s *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, *The Study of Sociology*, *On Liberty*, *A History of Politics*, etc. Lin translated works from Alexander Dumas fils, Balzac, William Shakespeare, Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, Swift, Haggard and others. The main translation purpose for them was to introduce the contents and the general views of western ideologies. The literary form was not their focus. Therefore, their translation seemed not faithful in a traditional view. With respect to the form of expression, most translators unanimously gave their translations highly domesticating titles. Quite a few translators even translated foreign novels into the traditional Chinese style with each chapter headed by a couplet.

The tendency to domesticating was obvious not only in linguistic expressions but also in transmitting deep meanings. Due to dramatic differences in ideology, cultural surroundings and

ethics between China and the West then, and the translators' own ideology, many translators deleted and rewrote the source texts randomly. Sometimes it was difficult to distinguish the translation from "creation". Take the translation of *Joan Haste* by Pan Xizi and Tian Xiaosheng for example; the translators deleted the parts which conflicted with the Chinese ethnics: "In 1901, Pan Xizi (Yang Zilin) and Tian Xiaosheng (Bao Gongyi) co-translated *Joan Haste*; it was published in 12 installments in *Learning Encouragement Collections*, and then off-printed by Wenming Publishing House, Shanghai in 1903. The translator purposefully translated half of the book only and deleted some parts under the excuse that they could not obtain the rest of the source texts, actually to keep Joan's fidelity." [6]

The initial translation of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* is another case in point. In the 7th to 13th chapters of Su Mansu and Chen Duxiu's selected translation *Miserable World*, "the translators conducted purposeful deletion, adding a chivalry character name Nan De, 'who knew well about the social development, and was a rare sensible person. He was radical in mind, and severely criticized the Confucianism, the government and the social evils.' When he learned from the newspaper that Jin Huajian was put into prison, he smote the Table and rose furiously, and regarded Jin just as a worker who 'abided by the law and behaved well' and stole a piece of bread just due to no food at home. Nan De spoke in the tone of French youth that 'only the yellow-skinned Chinese took Confucian teachings as the creed; should we, the noble French citizens, follow his words?'. He also expressed that 'there existed the destitute having no room to live, just because there existed the cruel rich men' and reached the conclusion that 'the wealth of the world should be for public use of the world citizens'" [7]. In this translation, the translator dramatically revised the translation in order to express his own ideology and political ideas. "It should be counted as a case of extremity in domestication." [8] Undoubtedly, adopting domestication as the main strategy does not mean that there existed no foreignization. It just implies that the foreignizing elements were not common. Take the translation of words for example; Lin Shu created "miyue" (honeymoon). Besides, some translators introduced some new literary forms to transform the Chinese literary tradition.

4. Literary Translation after 1978

Domestication had remained to be the dominant literary translation strategy by the time China began to adopt the reform and opening-up policy in late 1978 (except for the period of May 4th Movement when foreignization dominated due to the advocacy of the New Culture Movement). After the end of China's Cultural Revolution period, literary translation reached another peak, and about half of all the literary books on the market have been translations. With the development of social economy and culture, especially increasing cultural exchange with foreign countries, the cultural context under which literary translation is conducted has changed accordingly. For example, by 2017, over 120 million Chinese citizens had had their own passports, which means that so many people have travelled or are ready to travel abroad to experience different cultures. And between 1978 and 2018, more than 5 million Chinese studied abroad in various foreign educational institutions; China's outbound tourism market saw big growth in 2018 as mainland travelers registered 149.72 million outbound visits in 2018, and Chinese tourists have been pervasive across the world, just to name a few.

Therefore, Chinese people have adopted increasingly open attitude towards foreign cultures and been increasingly curious about and tolerant of cultural differences. Gender equality, LGBT, etc., are not new to young Chinese nowadays. It is under such a cultural context that foreignizing factors have increased in translation and gained general recognition. Prof. Sun Zhili also predicted long before that, domestication remained dominant throughout most of the 20th century; but this will be changed in the 21st century, when the foreignization method that endeavors to approach the author will be adopted increasingly extensively with the increasing international cultural exchange and communication among different races; foreignization will be equally important to domestication, even overshadow it.

Here is one case in point. Prof. Yang Shizhou has studied the different Chinese translation

versions of Robinson Crusoe, and also concluded that, in China, the re-translation of literary works has evolved from the “domestication to the target language” to the “return to the source language” [9]. One of his examples is the translation of such a sentence: “I believe it was the first gun that had been fir’d there since the creation of the world”. In an early Chinese translation, “the creation of the world” is translated into “kai tian pi di (creation of heaven and earth (by Pan’gu))”, while in other two latest versions, this segment is translated into something like “shang di chuang zao zhe shi jie (God created the world)”, thus avoiding unnecessary cultural association to Chinese legend.

Apart from at the level of linguistic expression, foreignization is also obvious in the selection of genre in literary translation. Magic novels, like Harry Potter, and other works, such as The Lost Symbol, The Da Vinci Code, Digital Fortress, etc., have all been translated into the Chinese language and millions of copies have been sold over years. These literary genres have greatly appealed to some Chinese readers, especially among the youth. Young people in China are familiar with western cultures through the internet and American and other English blockbusters, and are thus more interested in and more tolerant of different foreign cultures. Consequently, as the young readers grow up, they are more likely to accept more foreignization elements in translations of foreign literary works. And as the literary translation is more market oriented, the young readers’ taste will in turn stimulate further increase of those translations.

Another development trend in modern literary translation in China is the translation of literary works from the Chinese language into other languages. As China’s economy prospers, the influence of Chinese culture also expands and an increasing population outside China is interested in Chinese culture; more Chinese literary works are then translated and published in other countries, including Mo Yan’s Red Sorghum Clan and The Republic of Wine, which in turn helps the communication of Chinese cultures and promotes international cultural exchange. People in China and many other countries have been increasingly accustomed to global cultural diversity, and are thus more ready to tolerate different foreign cultural elements and foreignization treatment in translation works.

5. Conclusion

As André Lefevere noted that, “two factors basically determine the image of a work of literature as projected by a translation”: “the translator’s ideology (whether he/she willingly embraced it, or whether it is imposed on him/her as a constraint by some form of patronage) and the poetics dominant in the receiving literature at the time the translation is made.” [10] Most of them are part of what we call “cultural contexts” here. As expounded above, as China has developed from a highly closed, conservative country to a more opened-up, culturally-diverse one over the last century or so, the cultural contexts in China have also evolved accordingly. Through a comparative study of literary translation activities in the 1900s and those after 1978 in China in this paper, it is revealed that, the dominant literary translation strategy in China has consequently been shifted from domestication to foreignization, and more foreignization elements have appeared in literary translation works. Nonetheless, apart from cultural contexts, other factors that influence translation also exist, such as the author’s own translation style, specific target readers, etc. For that reason, domestication and foreignization always co-exist and are complementary to each other in any translation works, and the only difference lies in that which one is used more frequently. And there is no right or wrong in adopting a specific domestication or foreignization strategy, it depends on the specific need at a specific point of time.

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