

The Multilinear Evolution of Folk Culture: Rendition and Diffusion

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Abstract: Shaanxi is the cradle of Chinese culture, whose folk culture has long won the world's attention. More research efforts have been attracted to this field particularly after China's initiative of Chinese culture "going global". Taking as examples some Shaanxi folk culture on the representative list of national intangible cultural heritage, the paper explores its multilinear routes of cross-cultural evolution via rendering and diffusing from the perspective of cultural ecology in an attempt to highlight difficulties and corresponding solutions. The research findings of this paper may shed light on more Chinese culture's rendition and diffusion in methodology and paradigm, helping it leap over language hurdles to be means of cross-cultural communication, effectively and efficiently.

1. Introduction

Located in northwest China and as the starting point of the Silk Road, Shaanxi province is one of the birthplaces of Chinese civilization. It is, therefore, the spiritual cradle of Chinese culture. The brilliant Shaanxi folk culture wins recognition and praise from experts both at home and abroad for its wide variety, sincere rustic contents, distinctive local style, and rich flavor of life, which, in part, well explains the nostalgia of "Dungan people" [1], living in the "Shaanxi village" in Kazakhstan, near the borders of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and speaking Mandarin's Shaanxi dialect. It is, in this sense, that culture is the spiritual of mankind.

Contrary to high-end elite culture, folk culture, asserted by the Birmingham School [2], is the collective achievements of the nation's entire population, which means it derives from and represents ordinary people's ordinary life, and can be appreciated by ordinary people, too. This affinity between folk culture and ordinary people results in more foreign people's attention when they are met with a new culture. Furthermore, this affinity makes it theoretically possible for folk culture flux into and evolve in appropriate form in another culture to bridge cultural gap between peoples.

Research efforts have been made from different perspectives in the field since 2000. Among 83 articles collected, nearly all of them explore "folk culture" in a broad sense, including cuisines [3], dialects, weddings, folk sports, shadow puppets, cultural innovation industries, etc. It is understandable that most researches have been focused on the protection and development of folk culture even in the first decade of this century. But when technology changes and shakes the world in one way or another, more efforts are needed to see to it that how to help folk culture to function in another culture. Unfortunately, only four researchers, Tian Yaya, Sun Xue'e [4], Liu Mingge [5], Zhong Anlin [6] and Zhang Jun [7], reflect upon the cross-cultural diffusion of folk culture, with only one [8] on the Shaanxi folk culture representative list of intangible cultural heritage.

2. Cultural Materialism, Cultural Ecology and Multilinear Evolution

Defined in Raymond Williams' cultural materialism, "Culture is ordinary in every society and in

every mind” [9]. Culture is in this sense different from high culture in that it may be created and appreciated by ordinary people. Folk culture, therefore, can be concluded not to be elite culture in nature. It comes from the ordinary life of ordinary people and prevails among them being a part of their lives. For instance, on the representative list of the first batch of intangible cultural heritage of Shaanxi province [10], community acrobatic performance (*she huo*) originates from ancient people’s worship of god of land and fire, with land producing crops and fire making delicatessens. This close relation between folk culture and people’s ordinary life makes it a must-know for ordinary people in another culture in their cross-cultural interaction and communication.

An appropriate form of one culture in another is always worthy of painstaking consideration. Raymond Williams’ “structures of feeling”, based upon Birmingham School’s literature studies, is actually the nature of culture, which is an integration of the general experiences of social life and a particular material carrier of symbols. The latter plays the roles of vehicles, enabling the former to be comprehensible and communicable by information receivers. It is in this sense that “structures of feelings” is characterized by being societal, representative and communicative, which makes it possible for social individuals in different cultural environments to conduct meaningful communication.

In exploring functional “structure of feeling”, namely effective diffusing vehicles, Julian Haynes Steward’s cultural ecology [11] may be helpful to explicate culture’s multilinear evolving through “subsistence”, i.e. the dynamic interaction of man, environment, technology and social structure, which is contrary to Leslie White’s “universal cultural evolution”, an unilinear one. The cross-cultural evolution of folk culture in this research is multilinear in that factors, other than Steward’s, are involved when evolving from one culture to another, making it hard to make an unilinear progressive subsistence. Under this circumstance, strategies of selection and adaptation, have to be adopted to pave the way for rendition and diffusion. Hu Gengshen’s eco-translatology [12] may be theoretically inspired by this cultural situation, which coincides with missionaries’ Biblical strategies in China. To adapt to the situation that Chinese readers are at different levels of literacy they found after years of observation, missionaries chose to translate Bible into different Chinese versions, in different length with different amount of contents, like complete versions, compiling versions and abridged versions [13].

3. The Multilinear Evolution Route of Shaanxi Folk Culture

Particularly, cross-cultural evolution in this research means rendition and diffusion in foreign languages. Deemed as a useful tool to bridge two cultures, culture-ecology- based rendition functions as the first step to make it possible for two cultures to interact with each other. Such quality rendition, together with effective diffusion, may helps, to some extent, to improve mutual understanding and decrease hospitality.

3.1 Multilinear Rendition

Generally speaking, cross-cultural interaction and communication through folk culture cannot be avoided being affected, in effect, by their language forms. The pity is that some folk culture publications, though translated, failed to be received and understood by target readers. It may result from a lack of cautious selection of translation materials and of consideration of translation adapting to target cultural ecology.

Not all culture shares the same structure and ecology. Translation materials should be selected from the sea of Chinese folk culture in accordance with a hierarchy of readers’ acquaintance with them. Those shared by people worldwide, in their daily life experiences, enjoy the highest level and should be given priority to in translation, like festival celebration, marriage & funeral ceremony, table manners, etc. Those absent from target culture ecology should be put onto a waiting list until two cultures have moved to a phase of mutual understanding, like community acrobatic performance (*she huo*) , ancestor money burning, kitchen god worship, etc.

What follows the multi-linear materials selection is multi-linear translation, characterized by producing translation texts different from each other in translation strategies employed and amount

of contents included. Complicated target cultural ecology with complex “structures of feelings” calls for translation strategies. At the initial period of international interactions when two cultures know little about each other, translation strategy of domestication helps to create simpler texts, drawing near foreign readers to authors of translated work. As time goes by, foreignization sets in to unveil the true value of what has been translated.

3.2 Multilinear Diffusion

Multi-linear translation cannot go alone without multi-linear diffusion, which is marketing in nature. Seizing target readers is said to maximize marketing effectiveness. Those days are gone when bookstores are crowded with knowledge-thirsty readers. In this new era, when readers have access to numerous materials on line, to attract readers’ attention is a must to win in the market.

Folk cultures, originally rooted in particular cultural backgrounds, increase difficulty of marketing their translation versions in a foreign country. Relevant videos, introduction documents with illustrations, TV programs, etc, therefore, may help those readers with education background to be prepared to read text form of folk culture, which is advertised in a way of entertainment and received to a good extent. To ease the tense of school aged readers and to eliminate their resistance to approach foreign folk culture, picture-story books may help to present folk culture in simple words as well as by interesting pictures. When folk culture, local and exotic, express itself in different ways, its diffusion effectiveness will not be a big problem.

Diffusion effectiveness cannot go far without involvement of relevant culture authorities. It’s their job duty to consider how to improve different people’s mutual understanding by telling cultural stories. A good way worthy discussing is to incorporate folk culture in quality translation version of one country into students’ textbooks in another country, helping children in another culture to grow up with a worldview open to something new and different. It’s like sowing the seeds of embracing differences into foreign readers’ heart at an early age. Time will witness them grow into trees of friendship and love.

4. Summary

With the further development of globalization, countries are increasingly interwoven in one way or another. It is urgent to stand up with the situation where problems, conflicts even hostility are seen on the rise before it turns worse. Cultural diplomacy, folk culture in particular, other than that of politics, has always been considered to be an effective way to enhance country-to country relations.

Folk culture is regional in nature, seemingly conflicting with globalization. The truth is what’s unique for a nation is also precious for the world, which defines the folk culture’s nature to be universal as well. So when regional folk culture is translated into a foreign language and read in a foreign country, respecting, tolerating, learning and embracing are appropriate attitudes toward it.

Appropriate attitudes push readers to open their arms to embrace translated folk culture texts and welcome its multilinear ways of diffusion. Such cultural evolvement makes people realize the common feature human beings share via culture to further improve mutual understanding.

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