# Intercultural Factors Influencing the Process of Translation

**Dai Xiaoqian**
The Foreign Languages Department, Beihang University, Beijing-China
e-mail: gracelady_lynn@yahoo.com.cn, lynn_dai_wen@hotmail.com

**Abstract:** Translation is a complex process, involving linguistic, cultural and personal factors. This article seeks to show how inter-cultural factors constitute one of the main sources of translation difficultties. The author suggests that a systematic discussion of these factors would be useful in establishing effective strategies for avoiding pitfalls in translation between English and Chinese.

**Key words:** intercultural factors, translation

Translating, as I. A. Richards claims, "is probably the most complex type of event in the history of the cosmos" (as cited in Nida, 1993, p. 1). Many factors are crucial to the process of translating and no explanation of translating can claim to be comprehensive if these factors are not systematically considered. Owing to the great subtlety and complexity of the factors in question, this short paper will not be able to cover all these factors exhaustively, so the author will focus attention on key factors in one of the most important areas: inter- culture. The following discussion will be primarily concerned with translating between English and Chinese.

According to Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis, different linguistic communities have different ways of "experiencing, segmenting, and structuring reality" (Gorlée, 1994, p.105). Translating works to bridge the cultural gap between two worlds and make communication possible between different linguistic communities. Bassnett (1992) likens language to "the heart within the body of culture," pointing out that "the surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator treats the text in isolation from the culture at his peril" (p. 14). Edward Sapir (1956) claims:

> No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same worlds with

> different labels attached. Translating, which involves two languages, is unavoidably influenced by two cultures, the source culture (SC) and the target culture (TC). (p. 69)

The following discussion will look at how intercultural and factors influence the translation process. According to Catford (1965, p. 94), instances of untranslatability can arise from two sources: one is linguistic, and the other is cultural. A translator who fails to take the cultural context into account is likely to commit some ridiculous errors. The very existence of a cultural gap can act on the process of translating by interfering with the translator's logical judgment and linguistic selection.

## CULTURE-SPECIFIC EXPRESSIONS

Lotman claims, "No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture" (as cited in Bassnett, 1992, p. 14). Nida (1993) expresses the same idea in another way: "The role 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" (p. 11). It is true that different peoples live on the same planet in relatively similar material surroundings and that each language contains expressions to describe this material world—sun, river, rain, mountain, father, etcetera. But through long and unique evolution, each culture develops distinct conceptions about the world. As well as the common core expressions that are mostly conceptual or denotative, each language has myriad of culturally-specific expressions that are full of associations for people belonging to that culture. Thus the same object can be conceptualized or symbolized with different cultural "colors" or "flavors." For example, in the eye of Western people, "the pale white band of stars and clouds of gas that can be seen across the sky at night" is *Milky Way*, while to Chinese people it is *yinhe* (silver river). The two phrases refer to the same object, but they have different associations arising from distinct cultural identities. When Western people pray for another person's luck or fortune, they will say *God bless you*, while old Chinese people tend to say *Pusa baoyou* (Buddha bless). Here the meaning the speaker wants to express is the same, but different cultures will resort to different means of expression. The case is referred to by Lado (1957) as the "same meaning, different form" (p. 118). Since these forms are very often culture-specific or at least

culture-colored, some argue that they should not, culturally speaking, be considered substitutable. Thus, although the English *Milky Way* is often used as an equivalent of the Chinese *yinhe*, when *Milky Way* is used as the starting point for an extended metaphor, it would be awkward to substitute the image by *silver river* in translation; for example, (1) "See yonder, lo, the galaxye which men clepeth the *Milky weye*. For it is whyt, which men in England do call Watlyng Street" (Chaucer: *House of Fame*) (2) "A broad and ample road, whose dust is gold and pavement stars, as stars to thee appears seen in the galaxy—that *Milky way*, thick, nightly, as a circling zone..." (Milton: *Paradise Lost*). It seems very natural for poets to liken the *Milky Way* to a *street* and a *road* with *dust* and *pavement*. However, if *Milky Way* is replaced as Chinese *yinhe* (silver river), these images become inappropriate.

The followings are English versions from two Chinese classical poems: (3) "Passing an uneven pass I come aboard the boat UP into the *Milky Way*,..." (Translated by Wu Juntao)**,** (4) "A thousand starry sails dance in the fading *Milky Way*" (Translated by Xu Jieyu).

Reading these poems, Western readers will most likely be puzzled: How can *boat* and *sail* go along the *Milky Way*? In such cases, a literal translation accompanied by an explanatory footnote is recommended. Because of the importance of cultural coloring, it is generally not considered desirable to render such idioms as *teach fish to swim* into something like "to show one's proficiency with an axe before Lu Ban," or *in the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king* into something like "since there is no competent general in the kingdom of Shu, Liao Hua has to be chosen as the vanguard commander" The word "Shu' and 'Liao Hua" are used because they mean nothing to target language reader. Another type of cultural difference Lado (1957) distinguishes is the "same form, different meaning" (p. 114). The delusions that translators might come across usually come from this type of cultural difference. Since the "forms" of the related items are the same, they are often misleading. For example, the brand name of a well-known Chinese battery *baixiang* is literally translated as *White Elephant*. However, the translation elicits unfavorable reactions from English consumers, who use *white elephant* as an idiom to mean something costly but useless, whereas *baixiang* means fortune or good luck in Chinese. The connotations involved in each expression are culturally specific, so they

should not be used as equivalents. The following pairs provide further examples of the "same form different meaning:"

| **English** | **Chinese** |
|---|---|
| *Child's play* | *erxi* |
| (something easy or unimportant) | (irresponsible attitude toward something) |
| *eat one's words* | *shiyan* |
| (take back what has been said) | (break one's promise) |

If such items are translated literally from English into Chinese or vice versa, semantic distortion is unavoidable. How a translator treats such culture-specific expressions is a matter of individual judgment, and a number of satisfactory solutions are generally available. The ability to recognize the cultural connotations behind the "form," however, is a reflection of the translator's bicultural competence, which is no less important than his/her linguistic competence.

## AESTHETIC DIFFERENCES

There is a Chinese saying, "Everybody has a beauty-loving heart." However, people of different cultures see beauty in their own unique ways. What is beautiful to one culture may not be especially beautiful or may even appear ugly to another. The aesthetic norms of a given culture reflect how people think. It has been observed that Chinese people tend to think through images because of the influence of their old pictographic writing system (Guan, 1995, p. 104), while Western people are accustomed to thinking through logic because of their highly abstract and formalized language system. These thinking modes act directly on people's aesthetic orientation in writing. Chinese writers tend to produce texts full of images in order to render them lively and vividly. A Chinese text promoting tourism cited by Duan (1992, p. 27) demonstrates this image-preference. Describing a Dragon-boat festival, the text is full of highly metaphorical expressions, similes, metaphors, hyperboles, parallelisms, and the like. To a Chinese reader, it is beautifully written. But a literal translation into English may not evoke the same response. The following is an extract from the translation:

> The lithesome dragon-boats appear on the river as though the stars twinkle in the Milky Way. The richly decorated pleasure boats look like a scene of mirage. The splendent [*sic*] awnings in green and gold chain into a palace of crystal. Is this a fairy-land or a mere dream?

> Looking above, you can see the beautiful doves flying about. Looking below, you can see the sailing lamps glittering.

When this translation is shown to a foreign reporter, his reaction is negative: "full of hyperbole," incomprehensible and ridiculous (p. 32). Here, efforts to pursue beauty attract a negative reaction. Obviously, the translational strategy fails to serve the text purpose. The aesthetic presentation in the original reflects stylistic norms of a specific Chinese genre. The correct practice is to translate it according to analogous stylistic norms in the TC. Since aesthetic standards and norms differ from culture to culture, the translator should have a clear idea about where the difference is and how it should be treated so that the TL reader might have an analogous, or at least not negative, aesthetic reaction. If the translation produces a negative effect, no matter how faithful it is, it is a failure in both aesthetic and pragmatic terms.

In the example above, uniformity, represented by a series of parallel structures, reflects another aesthetic preference of Chinese writers and readers. This preference for uniformity is deeply rooted in Chinese culture and often influences the translator's lexical and syntactic selection in translating from English into Chinese. This influence is evident in any number of cases where English words and clauses are rendered into four-character Chinese phrases and parallel clauses. This practice has given rise to a long and heated controversy, centering on the point that such a strategy, laden with heavy cultural identity, might "beautify" or assimilate the original expressions. Given the traditional "master-servant" notion of translating, this kind of practice is a doubtful practice.

Another aesthetic factor that should not be ignored is the difference in literary norms between the SC and the TC. Such differences do not only underlie divergent styles of representation, but also mould the distinct methods of writing and eventually shape the unique aesthetic values in the two cultures concerned. If one is familiar with the tradition of Chinese classical fiction, or specifically, if one has read the four famous Chinese classical novels *Honglou Meng* (*A Dream of Red Mansions*), *Sanguo Yanyi* (*Three Kingdoms*), *Shui Hu Zhuan* (*Outlaws of the Marsh*), and *Xiyou Ji* (*Journey to the West*), all of which are *zhanghui xiaoshuo* (*chapter novels*, characterized by a couplet heading at the start of each chapter giving the gist of its content), one will understand why the translator Su Manshu added a couplet heading before each section in Hugo's *Les Misérables*. For instance, in the *Second Book*, the first section

entitled *The Night of a Day's Tramp* is substituted by a couplet meaning *In Digne a Traveller got into Trouble; At Croix de Colbas the Inn-host was Merciless* (Su, 1903, p. 672). Su's treatment is determined by an understanding of his readers' aesthetic habits. In his time, the novels familiar to Chinese readers were almost all so-called *chapter novels*; the introduction of a new mode of story telling might not have met the readers' aesthetic expectations and might, therefore, have been resisted. A similar concern is reflected in Lin Shu's translation of Dumas Fils's *La dame aux camélias* and Lin's contemporary Yan Fu's translation of Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, in which the original first-person narrators *je* and *I* are respectively substituted by *Zhong Ma* (i.e. Dumas Fils) and *He Xuli* (Huxley). The reason for this replacement is the fact that Chinese readers at that time were unaccustomed to first-person narration, and the translator chose to cater to the readers' preference even at the expense of the aesthetic flavor bestowed by the narrative point of view in the ST. What's more, in Fu Donghua's translation of *Gone with the Wind*, some long stretches of psychological description were purposefully omitted.

Similarly, in Lin Shu's translation of *David Copperfield*, a 127-word description of the "doctor" in the first chapter is summarized in two short clauses of only eleven characters. These omissions were made because long stretches of psychological and character description were not popular in early 19th century Chinese novels. The translators feared that direct transfer might not conform to the readers' aesthetic expectations and would, therefore, work against the aesthetic values of the original works.

These instances demonstrate how aesthetic differences affect the process of translation. A translator, as an individual in a specific culture, is sure to be influenced by the aesthetic traditions established in that culture. In a sense, culture itself is a huge text composed of various individual texts, the interrelation of which constitutes intertextuality. Whether one is a writer or a translator, the formation of one's aesthetic preference and writing style is largely determined by this unique intertextual situation. No literary translation can claim to be unaffected by the influence of aesthetic culture factors influencing the process of translation.

## ETHICAL INFLUENCE

Every society has an inherited ethical system that guides people's behavior and shapes their moral standards. Usually, the ethical culture of a specific society is characterized to a certain degree by exclusiveness, and cannot tolerate threats from what it regards as unethical or immoral elements introduced by a foreign culture. The degree of ethical tolerance varies between cultures and even between subcultures and different periods. The more conservative the culture, the more ethically exclusive it becomes.

China's feudal history endured more than 2000 years until 1912. The long-term dominance of feudal culture resulted in an ethically conservative and sensitive society, in which relationships between superior and subordinate, parents and offspring, husband and wife, man and woman, and friend and friend, were subject to strict and clear-cut ethical standards. By comparison, Western cultures are more tolerant. This imbalance will have some degree of influence on the translator's strategic selection which shows how much the strategic selection depends upon the ethical openness of the TC. In a more open TC context, the translator may be more SC-oriented; otherwise, he or she may be more TC oriented. Take for instance the Chinese translation of Haggard's *Joan Haste* in the early 1900s. Pan Xizi first translated this novel around 1900. Many descriptions of the love affairs between the heroine and the hero were deleted in this version. One of the most notable deletions was of *Joan*'s illicit pregnancy, considered the most unpardonable sin for a woman at that time in China, when even choosing one's own spouse was condemned as heretically immoral. Contemporary critics warmly welcomed such an ethically adapted version, and *Joan*, the heroine, was honored as a "chaste" "goddess." Several years later, Lin Shu published his version, which included the ethically dubious passages. Now the "chaste" "goddess" became a "nasty, shameless, mean" woman in the eye of the critics, and the translator himself was bitterly criticized by defenders of feudal ethical norms (Yin, 1907, p. 73). China has now become far more open, but Chinese people still cherish their deep-rooted ethical values and moral standards, and still will not tolerate lurid sexual scenes in literary works. Deletion and summarization, neutralization and archaization are still used by translators to treat explicit sexual scenes or sexual taboos.

Besides sex, violence and crime are also contrary to the ethical values of most societies. But interestingly enough, people seem to be more tolerant of translations of violence and crime in literature, and translators

make far less effort to adapt descriptions to the ethical norms of the TC. Another problem worth mentioning is cultural misreading caused by translation, which also results from cultural differences. A translator may replace an SL item with a TL item that he or she considers equivalent but which actually denotes quite different cultural values. The translator's misreading may distort the original writer's intention and culturally mislead TL readers. In translating Shakespeare's *King Lear*, for instance, Zhu Shenghao, the most famous translator of Shakespeare in China, renders the recurrent word *nature* as *xiao* (i.e. something like "filial piety") in many places. It should be pointed out that *xiao* is one of the strongest ethical conceptions of Confucianism, and is so culturally specific and has ethical connotation so different from those of *nature* and *love* used by Shakespeare that Chinese readers would be culturally misled. This is a typical case of cultural factors influencing the process of translating misreading in translation.

## CONCLUSION

This discussion of the intercultural factors influencing the process of translating demonstrates just how complex a task translation is. Each of these factors can seriously interfere with the translator's judgment and selection, and ultimately materialize in one form or another in the final translation. A clear and systematic understanding of the existence and operation of these factors may help us grasp the complicated nature of translating and design effective strategies to counter negative influences.

## REFERENCES

Bassnett, S. (1992). *Translation studies*, London and New York: Methuen.

Brown, G., & Yule, G. (1983). *Discourse analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Catford, J. C. (1965). *A linguistic theory of translation.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Duan, L. (1992). An appealing to translators to care about foreign publicity: An anthology of papers on Chinese-English translation techniques. *Chinese Translators Journal: Editorial Department* (pp. 19-37). Beijing: China Foreign Translation Publishing Company.

Gentzler, E. (1993). *Contemporary translation theories.* London and New York: Routledge.

Gorlée, D. L. (1994). *Semiotics and the problem of translation.* Amsterdam, Atlanta: G.A.

Guan, S. (1995). *Studies on communications across cultures.* Beijing: Peking University Press.

Kittel, H., & Frank, A. P. (Eds). (1991). *Interculturality and the historical study of literary translations* (pp. 71-74). Berlin: Erich Schmidt.

Lado, R. (1957). *Linguistics across cultures*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Leech, G. (1983). *Semantics.* Harmonthsworth: Penguin.

Liu, M. (1991). *CE-EC contrastive studies and translation.* Nanchang: Jiangxi Education Publishing House.

Luo, X. (1984). *Essays on translation*. Beijing: Commercial Press.

Ma, Y. (1991). *A collection of Su Manshu.* Guangzhou: Huachen Press.

Ma, Z. (1984). *A brief history of Chinese translation.* Beijing: China Translation Corporation.

Nida, E. A. (1993). *Language, culture, and translating*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Nida, E. A., & Taber, C. R. (1969). *The theory and practice of translation.* Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Sapir, E. (1956). *Culture, language and personality*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Saussure, F. de. (1960). *Course in general linguistics* (Wade Baskin, Trans.). London: Peter Owen.

Shen, D. (1995). Literalism: non 'formal equivalence'. *Babel*: *Literary Stylistics and Fictional Translation*, *35* (4).

Hugo, V. (1991). *Les Misérables* (Su Manshu, Trans.). In Ma Yijun (Ed.), *A collection of Su Manshu (Vol. 2).* Guangzhou: Huachen. (Original work published 1903)

Tan, Z. (1990). On semantic contrast in translating. In Yang & Li (Eds.), *An Anthology of Contrastive Studies between English and Chinese*

(pp. 128-139). Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Yin, B. (1907). On the Two Versions of Joan Haste. *Game World*, (11).