

Study on the English Translation of *Tongtong's Summer* from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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Abstract

President Xi Jinping has attached great importance to shaping global narratives for telling China's stories in his speeches. Two Chinese Hugo award winners, Liu Cixin and Hao Jingfang, as well as their translator Ken Liu have made a great contribution to it and brought "Chinese Science Fiction (SF)" into a buzz topic. However, the current attention on Chinese SF is limited; more outstanding Chinese SF authors and stories deserve to be known. Thus, this paper chooses Ken Liu's English translation of *Tongtong's Summer* by Xia Jia, a Chinese SF rising star, as the main subject. This paper applies the case study approach and analyzes the translation methods from the angle of Skopos Theory. This study finds that Liu has stuck to the skopos rule with the use of addition and omission translation methods; followed the coherence rule through combination, rearrangement, and shift; abided by the fidelity rule by applying the methods of literal translation and paraphrase. By studying Liu's translation methods, this study offers an opportunity for other translators to get the key to good translations, and obtain proper suggestions and guidance for SF or even other genres of Chinese literary works to be translated.

Keywords

Chinese Science Fiction; Skopos Theory; Ken Liu; Translation; Xia Jia.

1. Introduction

Chinese science fiction had its heyday in 2015 when Liu Cixin's *the Three-Body Problem* translated by Ken Liu has received the Hugo Award for Best Novel (All Chinese names in this article are presented in the form of "Family name + given name" in accordance with Chinese custom.). The emerging Chinese SF stories have excited global readers' strong interest and curiosity to appreciate more Chinese SF stories. In 2019, Barents Spektakel held annually in Norway invited Xia Jia, a rising star of Chinese SF, to read the English version of her work *Tongtong's Summer* [1]. The close bonding between family members moved the audience [2].

The works of Xia Jia face the predicament that only a few scholars have studied them. Generally speaking, SF cannot be considered a kind of mainstream literature. This genre of literature has enjoyed a small group of readers, compared with other genres of literature. In the world arena, Chinese SF is just a brick of the SF building. Prior to 2015, the most prominent Chinese scholar in the translation of SF is Guo Jianzhong, who has devoted a great deal of time to the study of the Chinese translation of foreign SF and has published *Studies of Sci-Tech Translation* to provide guiding suggestions for Chinese translators [3]. After 2015, Chinese SF shifted its role from a nobody to a somebody, however, the research subjects are limited—the majority of Chinese researchers have studied *The Three-Body Problem* trilogy and *Folding Beijing* from various points of view. Little attention has been paid to the English translation of other Chinese SF novels including *Tongtong's Summer*.

Tongtong's Summer is written in a distinct style, compared with Xia's other works. This novel is narrated from the view of Tongtong, a lively girl. Her grandpa broke his leg accidentally, and

her father brought a robot, named Ah Fu, to take care of Grandpa. After Grandpa found out the robot was remotely controlled by a real person, he conceived the notion of letting the elders operate the robots and serve society instead of idling at home. His concept sparked a brand-new revolution that paved the way for Confucius's ideal society, known as the Great Harmony. Skopos theory is one of the well-developed and classic translation theories. By following the skopos rule, coherence rule, and fidelity rule, the translation can achieve the purpose of the translation behavior. The main characters are Chinese and the story is set in China, so it is inevitable for the story to contain some Chinese characteristics that might be hard for foreign readers to understand. This way, Liu has applied different translation methods and strategies to smooth the translated text and make it more readable and understandable.

This research attempts to analyze *Tongtong's Summer* from the perspective of skopos theory and adopts a case study approach to find that Liu has employed many translation methods to meet the needs of the three rules and make the translation more acceptable and understandable for the anglophone audience.

2. Skopos Theory and Its Three Rules

Skopos theory was first brought by German scholar Katharina Reiss in the 1970s and introduced by Hans Vermeer into translation theory. According to Vermeer, the term "skopos" refers to the "purpose of translation [4]". He distinguished three possible purposes in translation: "the basic purpose of the translator in the translation process (probably 'to make a living'), the communicative purpose of the translation in the target language environment (probably 'to inspire readers'), and the purpose of using a particular translation strategy or translation program (for example, 'using literal translation to reflect the structural features of the source language') [4]." He argued that the translation methods and strategies must be determined by the intended purpose of the translation. The goal of Skopos theory is to know the point of a translation [5]. This enables translators to choose the best translation strategies for the translation, but it does not give translators free rein to act any way they like. There are three basic rules in Skopos theory that need to act up to the skopos rule, the coherence rule, and the fidelity rule.

The skopos rule states that, as defined by Vermeer and translated by Nord, "each text is produced for a given purpose and should serve this purpose. The skopos rule thus reads as follows: translate/interpret/speak/write in a way that enables your text/translation to function in the situation it is used and with the people who want to use it and precisely in the way they want it to function [6]." As a result, translators must be aware of both their skopos and the function of the translation. This rule is regarded as the primary one among the three. Vermeer has mentioned that "what the skopos states is that one must translate, consciously and consistently, in accordance with some principle respecting the target text. The theory does not state what the principle is: this must be decided separately in each specific case [4]". Only by doing so can the translation be successful and well-received by the audience [7].

The second rule, the coherence rule, requires that "a translation should be acceptable in a sense that it is coherent with the receivers' situation...A communicative interaction can only be regarded as successful if the receivers interpret it as being sufficiently coherent with their situation [6]." This rule instructs translators to take into account how the social and cultural aspects of the TT differ from those of the ST when performing translations. Only in this way can the translation becomes accepted and readable, leading to successful interactions in the end. TT must be translated in such a way that it is coherent for the TT receivers, given their circumstances and knowledge [8].

The last crucial rule is the fidelity rule, as known as inter-textual coherence. This rule requires that "the TT should bear some kind of relationship with the corresponding ST [6]." Nevertheless,

if the translation only adheres to the third rule and is one hundred percent faithful to its source text, it will be difficult for the target readers to comprehend the words or even the plot. Failure to follow the previous two rules would result in an unsuccessful translation. According to this rule, TT just needs to be loyal to ST's original meaning and does not require TT to be accurate. Vermeer indicates that "the faithful degree and form depends on how the translator understand the source text, and on the purpose of each translation as well [4]."

These three rules play unequal roles in the process of translation. The coherence rule and the fidelity rule are subordinate to the skopos rule, and the fidelity rule is subordinate to the coherence rule. And the relation between these three rules can be presented in the following figure: (This figure is made by the author herself.)

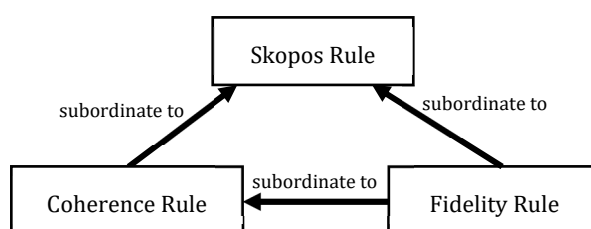


Figure 1. The Relation of Skopos Theory's Three Rules

3. Analysis of Translation Strategies from the View of Skopos Theory

3.1. The Skopos Rule in Liu's Translation

As the paramount one among the three rules, the skopos rule decides the translation action. This means the translation can violate the coherence rule and fidelity rule to meet the skopos if necessary. Liu's translation serves two purposes: to introduce more Chinese SF authors to foreign readers and to maintain the voice of the author in the translation [9]. To fulfill the skopos, the author used the translation methods of omission and addition.

3.1.1. Omission

The story was set in the Chinese cultural background. It is unavoidable to find some controversial parts in the article due to cultural differences. Thus, to make the translation more suitable and acceptable for western readers, Liu has omitted the "inappropriate" part. The following is a representative case.

Example 1:

ST: 外公年纪大了，做手术有风险，可硬拖着更危险。爸爸妈妈找了好多大医院咨询，商量了一宿又一宿，最后一咬牙，还是得做。瞒着外公，把医院偷偷联系好了，跟外公说只是个脑血管小手术。手术做了一整天，终于成功了。取出来的肿瘤有鸽子蛋那么大。手术后外公一直在昏迷，到现在还没醒 [10]。

TT: Given Grandpa's age, surgery was very dangerous. But not operating would be even more dangerous. Mom and Dad and Grandpa had gone to several hospitals and gotten several other opinions, and after talking with one another over several nights, they decided they had to operate. The operation took a full day. The tumor was the size of an egg Grandpa remained in a coma after the operation [11]. (All the source text and the translated text are taken from the same resources, and the resource of the following quoting texts part would be omitted.).

The literal translation of the above underlying sentence is that "They agreed to have the surgery. They lied to Grandpa about the tumor, telling him instead that he needed a tiny operation on cerebrovascular disease. (This is translated by the author herself.)" As it states, it is controversial. In Chinese culture, the family and its members are always set in the first place. From the perspective of Mom and Dad, not telling Grandpa the truth is for his sake, because Grandpa would feel upset, struggle, and probably refuse to do the surgery if told the truth. This

way, Mom and Dad, out of ethical reasons, chose to tell a white lie to protect Grandpa from being overwhelmed like themselves. However, western people have the tendency to believe that it is a human right to know their own body condition and to decide whether medical treatment should be done or not. No one can take this basic right away. Aware of the controversial point caused by cultural differences, Liu has decided to omit the controversial part, and changed the subject from “Mom and Dad” to “Mom, Dad and Grandpa”, shifting the situation from the whole Mom-and-Dad-lied-to-Grandpa thing to a decision made by the family discussion. The rewritten sentence eliminates the contentious part, making the article more acceptable to English readers, which paves a solid way to introduce Xia Jia and her work to foreign readers.

3.1.2. Addition

A good translation should both be easily understood and retain as much of the original writing's style as feasible. In this fiction, the translator often uses the translation method of addition to maintain the author's voice and style of the source text. Here are two examples.

Example 2:

ST: 小王又说，现在社会老龄化越来越严重，很多老人生活不能自理，自己儿女没有时间精力照顾，住老人院又怕孤单，对专业护工的需求就变得越来越紧迫。

TT: He explained that the aging population brought about serious social problems: many elders could not live independently, but their children had no time to devote to their care. Nursing homes made them feel lonely and cut off from society, and there was a lot of demand for trained, professional caretakers.

The source text only states that elders living in the nursing house would be lonely, and Liu has added a cause which is “that made them feel cut off from society”. For one thing, with the wise use of addition, readers can easily comprehend why Grandpa was so opposed to the idea of hiring someone to take care of him and how brilliant the invention of remote-controlled robots is, which can provide caring service to clients' homes. For another, it is by adding the cause that the translation can involve the reader to consider the growing aging population who are just physically old but still have an active and sharp mind. That is what Xia Jia intends to express in the original text. Therefore, Liu followed the skopos rule to successfully meet his aim of maintaining the original author's voice in the target text.

Example 3:

ST: 原来眼镜还能传送声音。她快活地高喊声：“没的事诶，外公！”

TT: Huh, so the glasses also act as a phone. Joyfully she shouted back, “Grandpa, don't worry, eh!”

“Huh” added by the translator is the essence of this sentence. The scenario of this case is when Tongtong wore a pair of high-tech glasses to climb the tree, she suddenly heard Grandpa's voice telling her about the risk of climbing such a lofty tree. According to the dictionary, “huh” has two meanings: one is used as a way of showing astonishment; another is used as a way of showing that you do not like, believe or agree with something. Firstly, this three-letter word revealed Tongtong's surprise at the glasses' communication function of which she was unaware before. Secondly, Tongtong did not treat the climb as a big deal, so “huh” also shows her disagreement about what Grandpa worried about. Furthermore, as noted previously, this fiction is narrated from the angle of Tongtong. Adding such an interjection not only obeys the skopos rule but also makes Tongtong more “naughty” and vivid; the text funnier and wittier.

3.2. The Coherence Rule in Liu's Translation

The coherence rule ensures that the translation is logically coherent, which becomes a solid foundation for western readers to understand the text. From the perspective of the linguistic level, Chinese and English share different language features. The former sometimes omits the subject and conjunctions showing causes since Chinese culture is a high-context culture, which means people can get the overtone or relation between the context even without being explicitly

stated; the latter is connected with its low-context culture, which hints that the communication is often concise, straightforward and clear. That is the reason why the translator uses translation methods of combination, rearrangement, shift, etc. to smooth the target text.

3.2.1. Combination

English is logical with a rigorous sentence structure, while the sentence structure in Chinese is more flexible. To accommodate the reading habits of English readers, the translator merges short sentences when translating from Chinese to English.

Example 4:

ST: 又有人说去爬树。树在河岸边，好高好粗的一棵龙槐树，像要把蓝天刺穿似的。真是一条龙变的吧。

TT: Someone suggested that they climb trees. There was a lofty pagoda tree by the river shore, whose trunk was so tall and thick it resembled a dragon rising into the blue sky.

The core of the original text consists of these underlying short sentences, whose literal translation is “the tree is by the river shore. A tall and thick Dragon pagoda tree. Like piercing the blue sky. Really like a dragon disguised in a tree. (This is translated by the author herself.)” It is not hard to tell that some sentences lack the subject. In this case, although literal translation cannot make sense, the logic of this sentence is easy to capture. The underlying part can be divided into four parts based on the punctuation, respectively describing the location of the tree(树在河岸边), its main features(好高好粗的), the specific species of the tree(一棵龙槐树), an exaggeration of the tree’s characteristics(像要把蓝天刺穿似的) as well as a figure of speech to supplement the features(真是一条龙变的吧). Therefore, Liu has combined these two sentences with the use of a relative clause. The logic between the last two short sentences is easily revealed—the tree is so tall that it resembles a dragon straightly rising into the sky—turning the translation more logical, understandable, and suitable for anglophone readers.

3.2.2. Inversion

Rearranging the sentences’ order is also a good way to deal with the language differences between Chinese and English.

Example 5:

ST: 他们一群小伙伴，有男的也有女的，十好几个人，自从放了暑假，天天聚在一起疯玩。

TT: Since the beginning of summer vacation, she and more than a dozen friends, both boys and girls, had been playing together every day.

The main structure of the original sentence is “他们一群小伙伴聚在一起玩。(she and her friends hang out together.)” And there are five parts separated by punctuation. The first three parts(他们一群小伙伴，有男的也有女的，十好几个人) are about the subject; the fourth part(自从放了暑假) describes when the action happened; the last part(天天聚在一起疯玩) points out what the subject has done. The original order is not suitable for English readers if translated literally. For example, in English, time seldom appears in the middle of a sentence. Thus, Liu combined several parts and changed the order of the sentence to clarify the entire sentence structure. Through the method of rearrangement, English readers can comprehend the text much easier.

3.2.3. Shift

In Chinese writing, the subject is sometimes not mentioned, however, which still cannot confuse Chinese readers as it can be deduced according to the context. Confronting this difference, translators usually add the relevant subject when translating the sentence, and sometimes shift the sentence into passive voice.

Example 6:

ST: 总之有阿福在家，绝对能把外公照顾好。

TT: Anyway, having Ah Fu around meant that Grandpa would be given good care.

Example 7:

ST: 如果家里有一个阿福，平时不用就让它歇着，需要的时候下个指令，就有护理人员上线为老人服务。

TT: But if a home had an Ah Fu, things were a lot better. When not in use, Ah Fu could just sit there, out of the way. When it was needed, a request could be given, and an operator would come online to help the elder.

Passive voice highlights the recipient of the action. Through the use of passive tense, Example 6 intends to express that Ah Fu, the remote-controlled robot, was capable of taking care of Grandpa. However, in Example 7, the subject should be the owner of Ah Fu who was supposed to give the order, while turning the sentence into the passive voice adds the feature of objectivity and user-friendly design to Ah Fu.

In Chinese, a word used in different scenarios plays various functions. Thereby, Liu applied the shift related to semantics, say, shifting a general statement into a specific one.

Example 8:

ST: 小孩子玩起来老是个不够，旧的游戏玩腻了，第二天就发明新花样。

TT: At their age, play had infinite variety. Having exhausted old games, they would invent new ones.

Example 9:

ST: “哎呀！这孩子！”... “小孩子心急。”他笑着跟赵爷爷说。赵爷爷也呵呵地笑。

TT: “Aiya! Careful, Tongtong!” ... “She’s just a kid, a bit impatient,” he said to Grandpa Zhao. The two old men laughed.

In the above cases, “孩子(kid)” is used in two different situations. Example 8 describes children’s nature—playing. Here “小孩子” refers to youngsters including Tongtong and her dozens of friends, who love playing and are full of energy. To improve the readability of the text, the translator then shifts the expression from a noun to a prepositional phrase, “at their age”.

In Example 9, Tongtong failed to reach a cup and broke it by accident. The first “孩子” refers to Tongtong. Besides, even though Grandpa only said two phrases, an interjection(哎呀) and a word (这孩子) whose literal translation is “this kid”, his overtone was “Aiya! How could you let this happen, Tongtong? Be careful!” So the shift from a general word to a specific person can make it easier for English readers to comprehend the plot. In addition, the usage of “小孩子” in Example 9 is quite similar to that of Example 8, both generating the sharing features of a kid. However, in Example 9, the feature turns into “being impatient.” Three classic and useful phrases can be used in any situation to ease unhappiness and even fights, which are “来都来了 (as long as we are here)”, “大过年的(Come on, for the sake of New Year’s Day, do not...)”, “还是孩子(he/she is just a kid)”. Keeping the cultural meaning of this word in mind, Liu narrowed down the scope of the original word and specified it on Tongtong to explain her careless action to ask for Grandpa Zhao’s understanding. With the means of semantic shift, the translation gets easy to understand for western readers.

3.3. The Fidelity Rule in Liu’s Translation

The fidelity rule requires the translation should, to some extent, be loyal to the source text that is usually exotic. Liu has used the translation methods of literal translation and paraphrase to keep the exotic feature, broadening the reader’s horizon and providing a platform to know Chinese culture.

3.3.1. Literal Translation

Every culture has its culture-specific words and expressions that cannot be found in other cultures. So literal translation is a good choice in translation, which can provide new information about the source culture.

The following case is a good example presenting how Liu has processed the unique Chinese medical culture.

Example 10:

ST: 操纵别人家的阿福，替各家各户的老人们问诊，摸脉，开药方。他还想让阿福给病人推拿针灸，为了锻炼这项技术竟然指挥阿福在自己身上孔针！

TT: He would listen to their complaints, feel their pulse, examine them, and write out prescriptions. He also wanted to give acupuncture treatments through Ah Fus, and to practice this skill, he operated his own Ah Fu to stick needles in himself!

The four verb phrases can actually match four ways of diagnosis in traditional Chinese medicine, which are “望闻问切 (pinyin: Wang Wen Wen Qie)”. Acupuncture is a Chinese traditional medical treatment that involves putting special needles into particular parts of the body. Literal translation unveils the used-to-be-mysterious traditional Chinese medicine by showing its exact steps and ways— “listening to their complaints, feeling their pulse, examining them, writing out prescriptions and even sticking needles”. By using literal translation, not only it is simple for anglophone readers to understand how dedicated Grandpa is but also the translated text is brim with Chinese features, showing the charm of Chinese traditional treatment.

Every culture has piles of expressions and metaphors related to their cultures, which are hard to replace in another culture. When dealing with such sentences, Liu has kept the original meaning and “defamiliarized” them to maintain the exotic feeling.

Example 11:

ST: 累了热了，就浩浩荡荡杀去小河边，像下饺子似的扑通扑通跳到河里面去。头顶上大太阳晒着，河水却那么清凉，多痛快！

TT: If they were tired or too hot, they would go by the river and jump in like a plate of dumplings going into the pot. The sun blazed overhead, but the water in the river was refreshing and cool. This was heaven!

In this case, “like a plate of dumplings going into a pot (像下饺子似的)” is the expression referring to the scene where everyone forms a line and jumps in the river one after another. Chinese people, especially those living in northern China, love eating dumplings which are a kind of traditional Chinese food whose inside is a small lump of vegetables or meat covered with a thin dumpling wrapper. If poured together, the thin wrapper would be easily broken while boiling. This way, dumplings are preferred to be put one by one. The way of putting dumplings in the pot gradually has grown as a metaphor to describe the similar scene. Instead of using a similar English phrase, the translator kept the original expression to vividly describe the way how these kids have fun in the river energetically and orderly, which can add some exotic flavor to the target text.

3.3.2. Paraphrase

China is a high-power-distance society and attached great importance to social relations. Therefore, there exists a huge difference in the way of addressing people between China and the anglophone world, the majority of which are low-power-distance societies. Literal translation probably cannot be understood by foreign readers. That is why Liu has used the method of paraphrase offering some necessary explanations. It not only has kept the Chinese addressing culture but also made it acceptable and understandable. The following are two typical cases in this article.

Example 12:

ST: 那人挠了挠头，怪不好意思地说：“阿福是我们给机器人起的名字。我姓王，不然你叫我小王吧。”

TT: The man in the picture awkwardly scratched his head and said, a little embarrassed, “Ah Fu is just the name we gave the robot. My real name is Wang. Why don't you call me Uncle Wang, since I'm a bit older?”

Example 13:

ST: 对面的视频墙上也有个人，却不是小王，是另外一位陌生的爷爷，满头白发，倒是不戴眼镜，面前摆着一盘棋。

外公说：“童童，这是赵爷爷。”

TT: On the video wall in front of him appeared another man, but not Uncle Wang. This man was as old as Grandpa, with a full head of silver-white hair. He wasn't wearing any goggles. In front of him was a Chinese Chess board.

“Tongtong, come say hi,” said Grandpa. “This is Grandpa Zhao.”

Chinese people prefer to address others with a certain frame: “Family name + title”. The title could be a working title or the name of some relative. The above two examples (Uncle and Grandpa) belong to the latter category. Regardless of whether the person is related in kinship to the addresser or not, Chinese people usually call a man slightly older than the addresser “uncle” and an old man “grandpa” to show respect and kindness. That is the reason why Liu has added “since I'm a bit older” when Wang asked Tongtong to call him “uncle”. However, in western culture, the family name is placed after the given name. Combining the two cultures, Liu came up with a solution with “title + family name”. This way, this solution can be more acceptable to English readers, in the meantime, offering information about Chinese addressing culture.

4. Conclusion

Through detailed analysis, this paper has found that Ken Liu has abided by the skopos rule and applied the translation methods of addition and omission to smooth the translated text as well as maintain the author's voice and writing style. With the aim of translation being reasonable and acceptable, he has followed the coherence rule, and adopted combination, rearrangement, and shift translation methods to clear the obstacle of the language difference. Literal translation and paraphrase are two main ways how Liu has acted up to the fidelity rule, which can preserve the exotic feature, expand the reader's horizon, and offer a chance to get to know about China and Chinese culture. The translation of *Tongtong's Summer* satisfies Western readers' curiosity about Chinese SF, breaks the stereotype, introduces diverse SF authors and works to the world, and more importantly accelerates the pace of Chinese SF going global.

By studying it, translators can learn lessons from this good translation, clarify the translation's purpose, apply appropriate translation strategies, and cultivate more talents like Ken Liu who would make a great contribution to making China's voices heard around the world, shaping global narratives for telling China's stories and promoting Chinese SF and even other genres of Chinese literature going global.

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