

A Study on the Strategies for Translating Four-Character Idioms into English from Cross-Cultural Perspective -- Take Besieged City as an Example

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Abstract

As one of the important representatives of Chinese culture, Chinese literary works are rich in four-character idioms with far-reaching meanings, which should be paid full attention to in the process of translation. Cross-cultural theory is a comparative analysis of attribution and difference of cultural phenomena, aiming at the understanding of cultural differences. Based on a cross-cultural perspective, this paper analyzes the four-character idioms in Qian Zhongshu's work, *Besieged City*, which translated by Jeanne Kelly and Nathan K.Mao from three aspects: thinking patterns, communication audience and purpose, and translation aesthetics. The conclusion shows that to a certain extent, the translator's selection of specific translation strategies can effectively convey the meaning of Chinese four-character idioms, make the target language fit with the cultural context of the original text, and achieve the purpose of cross-cultural communication.

Keywords

English translation, Chinese idioms, Cross-cultural, Besieged City.

1. Introduction

Chinese literature is an important component of Chinese culture, showing the essence and spirit of the Chinese people from an all-round and multi-perspective, enlightening people's life and boosting their spirit. Its translation is also an important channel to spread Chinese cultural features to foreign readers, highlight the character of the Chinese nation, shape the positive image of the Chinese people, improve the soft power of Chinese culture and enhance the confidence of Chinese culture. The influence of Chinese traditional culture on overseas readers is silent and imperceptible (Shan Weilong, 2023:101). In addition, compared with Western literature, Chinese literature has a unique stylistic style and ideological connotation, which integrates writing, narration, landscape painting and lyric expression. With the acceleration of the pace of "culture going out", how to effectively spread the unique literary connotation of Chinese literature has become an important issue. The four-character idiom which has unique Chinese characteristics in content and form carries rich cultural connotation and it is an important carrier for people all over the world to understand and comprehend Chinese culture (Song Yan, Cai Fengzhen, 2023:171). In terms of content, on the one hand, some four-character idioms condense traditional Chinese stories and gradually evolve into a classical cultural form with rich meaning and educational significance. On the other hand, another part of the four-character idiom contains unique regional and social customs, which is an important reference to understand the social customs of the ancient Chinese nation. In form, the four-character idioms also achieve the perfect combination of "form" and "sound". The Chinese language is characterized by the integration of linguistic meaning and linguistic form, and the meaning of language can be known from the composition of words and words, which makes Chinese literary works have the beauty of form and meaning (Ouyang Shan, 2023:153). As a normal form of Chinese language, four-character idioms have symmetrical structure, beautiful rhyme

and catchy reading, which make the literary works vivid and the language expression accurate and powerful. Therefore, it is particularly important for translators to accurately convey the unique aesthetic meaning of the form and content in the process of English translation. As a bridge connecting the world, translation not only needs to realize the bilingual transformation between English and Chinese, but also needs to realize the communication between the cultural and literary phenomena behind the language, which is an important evaluation parameter of translated works. Next, this paper will summarize the characteristics of Chinese words from a cross-cultural perspective, analyze the influencing factors in the process of English translation and the translation strategies of idioms in *Besieged City*, so as to summarize the corresponding translation strategies to promote the overseas communication of Chinese literary works and achieve the purpose of cross-cultural communication.

2. Characteristics of the four-character idiom

2.1. Section Headings

2.1.1. Sub-section Headings

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2.2. Page Numbers

As a treasure in Chinese culture, the Chinese four-character idiom was rich and unique. These idioms not only embody the wisdom and painstaking efforts of the ancient sages, but also the essence of the Chinese language and culture. Chinese idioms can fully reflect the natural environment, humanistic and social environment, social system and folk customs of the Chinese nation like a mirror (He Yongbin, 2016: 73), and are unique in Chinese culture because of their conciseness, long history, vivid images, rigorous structure, wide application and unique culture. They are the crystallization of the wisdom of the Chinese nation and a cultural treasure. First of all, one of the biggest characteristics of four-character idioms is that they are concise. They convey rich connotations with a very small number of words. This concise way of expression makes the idiom not seem lengthy and cumbersome when conveying information, but also allows people to be clear at a glance and quickly grasp its meaning. At the same time, the meaning of four-character idioms is often very profound, and they are able to accurately express complex thoughts and emotions, with a high degree of generalization and philosophy. In addition, the formation of four-character idioms has gone through a long historical process. Many idioms are derived from ancient classic documents, historical stories, or folklore. In the process of circulation, these idioms have been used and passed down from generation to generation, and have gradually formed fixed expressions and meanings. Therefore, the four-character idiom not only has a profound cultural heritage, but also carries a wealth of historical information. Secondly, four-character idioms often express their meaning through vivid metaphors, personifications, and other rhetorical devices. This way of expression makes the idiom extremely appealing and expressive, which can resonate and think about people. At the same time, the meaning of the four-character idiom is also very rich, they can not only express positive values and moral concepts, but also reveal social phenomena and life philosophy. This entertaining and educational expression makes idioms play an important educational role in

the inheritance. In terms of linguistic structure, four-character idioms are very rigorous in structure, usually following certain grammatical rules and rhetorical techniques. This rigorous structure makes the idiom more accurate, concise, and powerful in expression. At the same time, the pronunciation of four-character idioms is also very harmonious, and they often use techniques such as flat and rhyme to enhance the rhythm and prosodic beauty of the language. This phonetic harmony makes idioms extremely frequent and recognizable in both spoken and written languages. Finally, four-character idioms are very widely used in Chinese, such as daily communication, literary creation, advertising, etc. Whether in oral expression or written writing, idioms can play an important role in making the language more vivid and infectious. With the gradual deepening of world communication, idioms not only occupy an important position in Chinese culture, but also gradually show their unique beauty to the world.

3. Influencing Factors

3.1. Thinking patterns

When talking about the translation of *Besieged City*, Jeanne Kelly and Nathan K. Mao believes that "the first thing a translator should do is to be faithful to the original text. He can change the form, but the meaning cannot be changed, and he must adapt to the readers' language habits." The English and Chinese ethnic groups originated from different civilizations, so they have their own unique characteristics in terms of human geography, growth environment, historical knowledge, philosophical concepts, cultural background, religious beliefs, cognitive psychology, language structure and way of thinking (Huang Qing, 2011: 249). As an externalized form of thinking, language will inevitably be influenced by thinking, resulting in the difference in the appearance and form of Eastern and Western languages and the inherent nature of Eastern and Western language forms. The process of translation, which on the surface appears to be a transition between two languages, is essentially a transition between two ways of thinking. This is where the difficulties and obstacles arise in the translation process. Jia Yuxin proposed that the thinking patterns of Western people is characterized by logic, analysis, and linearity, while the thinking patterns of Oriental people is dominated by the totality of intuition and the dialectical nature of harmony (Jia Yuxin, 1997: 96, cited in Huang Qing, 2011: 249). As a unique form of expression in Chinese, the four-character idiom, its short, concise, and neat sentence structure fully reflects the concise and concise way of thinking of Chinese, and creates a rich language and cultural world with simple words. In order to reduce the difficulties in translation caused by the way of thinking, the translator needs to accurately understand the similarity and individuality and difference and identity between Eastern and Western thinking (Huang Qing, 2011: 251), consciously change the way of thinking, reorganize the language and reconstruct the plot according to the thinking patterns and reading habits of the target readers, avoiding the mechanical transplantation of the original language form into the translated text, reducing the production of "Chinese English" and achieving equivalence in form and content between the original text and target text.

3.2. Audience and Purpose of Communication

The intercultural process is, to some extent, a process of transmission and reception. The ultimate goal of translating literary works is to realize the dissemination of China's excellent traditional culture to the outside world, promote culture to go global, and strengthen cultural soft power. Therefore, in the process of translating literary works, in addition to taking into account the essential differences between Eastern and Western thinking patterns, translators also need to take into account the interests and needs of mainstream ideologies such as publishers, markets, and patrons. Andre Lefevere (2004: 15) points out: "The patron is in control of the whole process of translation at all times. He believes that the literary operating system has a dual element of manipulation, that is, the internal factor of manipulation and the

external factor. Internal factors usually refer to the composition of objective subjects with different identities in ideology and mainstream poetics; The external factors of manipulation are mainly composed of "patrons" who are more interested in the ideology of literature than in the poetics of literature (Zhang Xiaojuan, 2010: 131). Jeanne Kelly and Nathan K. Mao' main purpose in translating *Besieged City* was to introduce Western readers to this realistic satire work, which involves a large number of four-character idiom about Chinese history, cultural figures, cultural allusions, geographical environment, and people's livelihood customs and reflects the real life of intellectuals in the Kuomintang during the Anti-Japanese War in China, who lived in abundance but had a poor soul. Therefore, in order to enable the target language readers to better integrate into the background of the times, immerse themselves in the wonderful plot of the novel, and maintain the fluency and continuity of reading, the translator adopts corresponding translation strategies in the translation more flexibly, such as free translation, Literal translation, absolutely literal translation, additional translation, omission and etc., to adjust the translation and better reflect the social outlook and character portraits in the original work on the basis of faithfulness.

3.3. Translation aesthetics

According to Hua Yanli and Li Sujuan (2017: 366), translation aesthetics is the analysis of relevant issues in translation from the perspective of aesthetics, so as to preserve and convey the "beauty" of the source language to the greatest extent. Generally speaking, the transmission of translation aesthetics is realized mainly through two ways. The first is the aesthetic object, namely the literary works and the translated works themselves. Literary works are not only the crystallization of human civilization, but also closely related to the political, economic, historical and cultural background of the country where they are located, recording the development course of people and things in a specific historical period. When translating literary works, we should not only consider the historical background and cultural connotation of the works, but also pay attention to their aesthetic needs. That is, translators should recognize the importance of aesthetic value in literary works, consider the characteristics of literary language, and strive to transform translation into a work that integrates accuracy, artistry and readability (Ouyang Shan, 2023:156). In addition, in order to fully display the "beauty" in the original text in translation, the translator needs to feel the "beauty of content, beauty of form and beauty of rhythm" of the source language from the level of aesthetic subjects, that is, author, translator and reader, and to feel the "beauty of culture, beauty of value and beauty of knowledge" of the source language from the level of culture on the basis of the Combination of their own aesthetic standards and cultural basis to carry out cross-cultural transformation at the cultural level. The four-character idioms that are neat in structure, harmonious in rhyme, rich in metaphor and profound in meaning show their unique beauty no matter from the perspective of language structure or cultural value. In order to realize the aesthetic value of four-character idioms, translators should not only understand the use of idioms in context, but also give full play to their own subjective initiative and enrich the aesthetic meaning of the translation with their own cultural nutrition.

4. Specific translation strategies for idioms in the English translation of *Beseiged City*

4.1. Literal Translation

The literal translation method, literally speaking, is direct translation, which can also be called "word-to-word translation". In fact, it means to keep the original content and expression of the target sentence as much as possible in the translation (Li Jing, 2017: 367), so as to preserve the

unique linguistic structure and cultural characteristics of the original text, making the translation novel and interesting and full of exotic characteristics.

Example1 ST: 家世头衔都不错，并且现在没真做女婿已住在挂名丈人家里，将来招赘入门，易如反掌。（钱锺书，2012: 39）

TT: The family background and qualifications were quite good. Furthermore, since he was now already living at the home of his nominal father-in-law without ever having actually become his son-in-law, taking him into the family would be as easy as turning the palm. (J. Kelly & N. K. Mao, 2003: 42)

As a pictographic language, the structure of Chinese words has the function of ideography, and the meaning of Chinese words can be seen from the method of word formation. As the crystallization of Chinese language, the completely meaning of four-character idioms can also be inferred directly from each meaning of the word. This kind of words integrated according to the literal meaning, relatively fixed sentence pattern and elegant style are called combinatorial idioms (Ouyang Shan, 2023:154), which highlights the predictability of the meaning of Chinese idioms. Such combinatorial words can be translated by literal translation. When using the literal translation method, the translator should try his best not to destroy the linguistic structure of the original text, maintain the integrity of the content and form of the original text, and only make adjustments to a certain word or phrase when necessary. In example1, the idiom "易如反掌" can be inferred the whole meaning of the word from the single word, which is simple and easy to understand. In the translation, "易如反掌" is translated as "as easy as turning the palm". This translation method not only preserves the form of the original text well, but also fully translates the figurative meaning in the original text, thus achieving the retention of the content. This kind of literal translation strategy has always occupied an important position in literary translation. In fact, when translating cultural equivalents, literal translation strategies maintain unity with the original in form and content, and also maintain the unique national characteristics of the language to a certain extent. In addition, Jenny Kelly and Nathan K. Mao also use literal translation when translating idioms related to certain cultural images, in order to preserve the unique images in the original text.

Example2 ST: 苏小姐理想的自己是：“艳若桃李，冷若冰霜”，让方鸿渐卑逊地仰慕而后屈服地求爱。（钱锺书，2012: 56）

TT: Miss Su, who pictures herself in the words of the familiar saying, “as delectable as peach and plum and as cold as frost and ice,” decided she would allow Fang to humbly gaze at her in admiration and then himself to beg for her love.” (J. Kelly & N. K. Mao, 2003: 58)

In Example2, for the cultural image contained in Chinese idioms, the translator also adopts a literal translation to present the image to the reader. The reason is that although there are huge differences in thinking between the east and the west, they also have a common cognition of common things. This general cognition is one of the foundations for successful cross-cultural communication and one of the reasons why translation can be carried out in the process of cross-cultural communication.

"桃李" originally refers to the delicate flowers in early spring, which are used to describe women's faces that was delicate and gorgeous like "peaches and plums". In *the Sea of Chinese Idioms*, the interpretation of "艳若桃李，冷若冰霜" is as beautiful as peach and plum flowers, as cold as frost, describing the woman's beautiful appearance and cold expression (Dai Qinxiang, 2002:1274 quoted from Li Yue, 2004:77). In the translation, the translator here retains the same language structure as the original text, transliterating "如" and "若" into "as...as", which retains the original sentence structure relatively completely, and the translated text is also catchy to read and harmonious in rhyme. In addition, both Eastern and Western perceptions of these material images of "桃", "李" and "冰霜" are "delicate and charming" and "cold and

indifferent", so that readers will not have cognitive biases even if literal translation is done. Therefore, the author adopts the translation strategy of literal translation, directly translating these two images into "peach" and "plum". On the basis of fidelity to the original text, it retains the unique cultural image and charm of Chinese.

4.2. Free translation

Among these translation strategies, free translation means that the translation of the original text does not need to pursue formal consistency, but only needs to accurately express the original meaning of the source language, so that the translation can be adjusted to a certain extent according to the translator's own language habits. Free translation is more suitable for the situation where there is a big cultural difference between the two languages, and pays more attention to the relative independence between the original language and the new language, so that the national characteristics and cultural connotations of the target language can be better understood from the language after free translation (Li Jing, 2017: 368).

Example3 ST: 当是汝校男女同学, 汝睹色起意, 见异思迁。(钱锺书, 2012: 8)

TT: It can only be the result of your attending a coeducational school--seeing women around has put ideas in your head. The sight of girls has made you think of change. (J. Kelly & N. K. Mao, 2003: 10)

In example3, The translator translated "见异思迁" into "The sight of girls has made you think of change". This free translation method directly translates the meaning of the four-character words without considering the linguistic form of the original language. Moreover, translator uses "The sight of girls" to specifically give the reason for "迁" and point out the context and background of the novel, which is helpful for the readers to review the above context when reading and to keep the coherence with the previous plot. In addition, it also portrays the character image of Fang Hongchien who is selfish, irresponsible and hypocritical

Example4 ST: 我丈母娘在发神经病, 她最爱无事生风, 真混账——(钱锺书, 2012: 117)

TT: My mother-in-law is being ridiculous. She just likes to make a fuss over nothing, the goddamn — (J. Kelly & N. K. Mao, 2003: 119)

In Example [4], the translator still adopts the method of free translation to translate the Chinese four-character idiom "无事生风" into the corresponding English phrase "to make a fuss over nothing." "fuss" originally means "大惊小怪" in English. Here, the translator also adopts the free translation method to overcome the cultural default barrier between Chinese and English, so that the target language readers can directly understand the connotation meaning of the word. Although the cultural image will be lost, it ensures the accurate transmission of the meaning, which is beneficial to readers' acceptance to a certain extent.

4.3. Absolute literal translation

In fact, the absolute literal translation method is an transplantation method (Pan Zhengqin, Mo Ruyu, 2014:124), which requires the translator to find the corresponding words or expression in the target language and that words or expression is equivalent with the source language in content and form. This kind of strategy can not only realize the transmission of information well, but also can be used in a wide range of applications. It also play a important role in the translation and understanding of a large number of new words and hot words, making the translation and the original text remain unchanged in the functional sense of their respective language systems (Ouyang Shan, 2023:156). The application of this method to the translation of idioms will not only reduce the difficulty for the target readers to understand the obscure and difficult idioms, but also increase the target readers' reading interest and deepen their understanding of the unique aesthetic value in Chinese literary works.

Example5 ST: 买书画买了假的, 一文不值, 只等于waste paper。(钱锺书, 2012: 41)

TT: If you buy calligraphy or paintings which turn out to be fakes, they aren't worth a cent. They just amount to wastepaper. (Jeanne Kelly & Nathan K. Mao, 2003: 44)

Example6 ST: 鸿渐兄，你虽然研究哲学，今天也甘拜下风了。（钱锺书，2012: 88）

TT: Hung-chien, you've studied philosophy, but you should be quite willing to take a back seat today. (J. Kelly & N. K. Mao, 2003: 89)

In example 5, "文" is one of the units of currency measurement in ancient China, which is about 0.2 yuan of today's RMB., while as the smallest unit of monetary measurement in the US dollar, "cent" is about 0.066295 yuan. The semantic meaning of these two images is too different, if the pragmatic equivalence is too emphasized, the translation of "文" into "three cent" will cause the structural deviation between the target language and the source language, and the translation will also lose the connotation of the source language. Similarly, the "甘拜下风" in Example 6 that comes from *The Mirror Colored Reason* by Li Ruzhen of Qing Dynasty: "Such a discussion; Only to see the scholar has its own outstanding view; Is the origin of family learning; Girls will bow down." means to sincerely admire others, admit that they are not as good as others, metaphorically in a disadvantaged position. The translator also directly applies the original English expression "take a back seat", which means "give way, take a back seat" to express the metaphorical meaning implied in the original language. Here, the translator reinterprets the original text based on the English cultural background, so that the target language readers can have the reading experience close to the source language readers to the greatest extent, which not only retains the profound connotation of the cultural image of the original text, but also realizes cross-cultural communication at the cultural level.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, language is a part of culture, and idioms are the essence of Chinese culture. What contained in Chinese idioms can be spread through the means of translation, so that more people can know the beauty of Chinese traditional culture and literature, which is benefit to speeding up the pace of our country's culture "going out". On the basis of considering the thinking patterns of English and Chinese languages, the purpose and the audiences of communication and translation aesthetics, Jenny Kelly and Nathan K. Mao, on the basis of considering the thinking patterns of English and Chinese languages, the purpose of communication audiences and the aesthetics of translation, fully considering the unique cultural background of the original text and the differences between the two language systems, carried out a cross-cultural translation of a unique language phenomenon in Chinese - a four-character idiom from a cross-cultural perspective. This is helpful for the target language readers to deeply understand the cultural image behind it and promote the dissemination of excellent traditional literature works in our country. In addition, Jenny Kelly and Nathan K. Mao have a deep understanding of the work. On the basis of following the spirit of the original text, they obey the aesthetic expectations and reading habits of the translated readers, ensure the readability and aesthetic value of the translated text, and choose flexible and diverse translation strategies to translate the *Besiege City*, such as literal translation, free translation and absolute literal translation, to maximize the cross-cultural aesthetic of Chinese four-character idioms, so as to ensure that the information of the original text is accurately conveyed while retaining the cultural image and linguistic beauty in the original text, so that the translation is smooth and accurate, and the "beauty of sound, shape and meaning" are achieved. These various translation strategies achieve a good trade-off in terms of the balance between the attention and readability of the translation.

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