

A Comparative Study on Translation Strategies of "Covert Text" in Chinese Allusions

-- Take Two English Versions of the First Visit to the Red Cliff as Examples

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Abstract

The translation of allusions is, to some extent, a form of cultural exchange, often involving ethnic elements, imagery, and associative meaning. In *the First Visit to the Red Cliff*, the poem was set in the Battle of Red Cliff during the Three Kingdoms period, with many allusions rich in cultural connotations to express Su Shi's broad-minded, optimistic, and positive attitude towards his life. In this paper, the author attempts to analyse two English-translated texts of *the First Visit to the Red Cliff* from the perspective of Studies of Translation Dynamics, exploring the translation strategies and skills employed by the two translators facing "Covert Text" and comparing their commonalities and differences.

Keywords

English versions of *the First Visit to the Red Cliff*, Studies of Translation Dynamics, "Covert Text", English Translation of Chinese Allusions.

1. Introduction

Allusions are a language phenomenon rich in associative meaning. Through simple symbols, allusions convey complex information, characterized by evoking readers' imagination beyond the text itself and establishing connections between the text and related historical stories, folklore, and literary narratives. Allusions are classified into story allusions and phrase allusions. The former refers to allusions with storylines in their sources, while the latter involves phrases without storylines in their sources, which were originally created or used and later adopted by subsequent generations [1]. The proper use of allusions can empower the expressive way of poetry, conveying rich connotations with limited vocabulary, expanding the depth of works, and achieving aesthetic resonance and emotional sublimation. China boasts a long history and splendid culture, and Chinese allusions generally originate from literary works, historical events, myths and legends, etc., such as Zhuang Zhou's Dream of Butterflies, Emperor Wang's Cuckoo, and the Burning of Red Cliff. *The First Visit to the Red Cliff* employs many culturally coloured allusions, and the title of this prose essay is derived from the Battle of Red Cliff, one of the Ten Great Battles of the Three Kingdoms Period. In 208 A.D., during the Three Kingdoms Period, the famous general Zhou Yu of the Wei state defeated Cao Cao's navy with the strategy of burning linked boats at Red Cliff, achieving victory with the weaker force. Su Shi was exiled to Huangzhou, Hubei Province, due to his opposition to Wang Anshi's reform. He visited the Red Cliff outside Huangzhou City and composed *The First Visit to the Red Cliff* with the Battle of Red Cliff as the theme to discuss the present by referring to the past, expressing his feelings about being exiled and, more importantly, demonstrating his broad-minded attitude towards life. There are over a dozen existing English translations of *The First Visit to*

the Red Cliff from translators, such as Herbert Allen Giles, Li Gaojie, Graham, Watson, Yang Xianyi, Dai Naidie, Lin Yutang, and others.

The translation of allusions in classical poetry is a huge challenge, as Chinese allusions are deeply imbued with rich national characteristics that can be difficult for foreign readers to understand and appreciate. Ding Xiaowei argues that the vast differences between English and Chinese allusions, both in form and content, are unparalleled among other linguistic phenomena. Therefore, the mutual translation of English and Chinese allusions is more influenced by cultural factors than by linguistic ones [2]. While there may be instances where both English and Chinese cultures apply similar standards or criteria to evaluate people or things, the vast historical and cultural differences make it impossible for readers of the source language and the target language to have identical associations when encountering allusions. Addressing the cultural aspect of allusion translation, Yue Jinsheng points out that allusions, due to their unique semantic multiplicity and the diverse cultural and national connotations they carry, are prone to becoming victims of under-translation. He further summarizes and elaborates on various phenomena of under-translation and how cultural compensation can be employed in such cases [3]. In translating allusions, it is unlikely for a translator to achieve equivalence between the source language and the target language by solely adopting one translation method. Instead, we must integrate various methods, with one serving as the primary approach and others as supplementary, and proceed from the specific context to find a balance between fidelity to the original text and fidelity to the target language readers.

2. Introduction to Translators

There are numerous English translations of Su Shi's work *The First Visit to the Red Cliff*. In this paper, the author selects the translations by the Chinese translator Xu Yuanchong and the renowned American sinologist and translator of Chinese classics, Burton Watson (1925-2017), as research materials to explore their handling of the covert texts in Chinese allusions.

2.1. Brief Introduction to Xu Yuanchong

Xu Yuanchong was born in Nanchang, Jiangxi, in 1921. He has published over 120 translated works and books on translation theory. His translation endeavors primarily revolve around two main threads: the first is translating representative classic literary works from Western countries, mainly Britain and France; the second is translating classic works embodying the essence of traditional Chinese culture, covering poems, lyrics, songs, and dramatic works [4]. In 2014, he received the highest award in the international translation community, the "Aurora" Award for Outstanding Literary Translation, becoming the first Asian translator to win this honor. He excels at addressing the vast differences between Chinese, an ideogram-based language, and English, a phonetic language. Chinese poetry pursues an ethereal realm, devotes itself to the creation of artistic conception, and emphasizes imagery, association, and resonance. Reflecting these spirits and conveying their effects in translation is challenging as it is difficult to find a basis for conversion or feasible methods in Western translation theory. Xu Yuanchong is adept at seeking theoretical resources for translation from Chinese academic traditions. Taking his English translation of Song lyrics as an example, we can clearly see how he starts with his understanding, cognition, and evaluation of Song lyrics, grasps the style, value, and characteristics of representative Song lyricists, and then, with reference to traditional Chinese aesthetics and the "Three Beauties" theory formed from Lu Xun's related discussions, analyses the problems encountered in translation, especially the difficulties posed by Chinese Song lyric creation to English translation, and then adopts effective approaches to leverage the advantages of Chinese and translate into exquisite words rich in the "Three Beauties" as much as possible [5].

2.2. Brief Introduction to Burton Watson

Burton Watson was born in New York in 1925 and served in the United States Navy for three years. In 1951, he sailed to Japan, where he taught English at Doshisha University and served as a research assistant to Professor Yoshikawa Kojiro, the head of the Chinese Studies Department at Kyoto University, gaining access to research on Chinese poetry. Since then, he has published over 20 works on Chinese literary studies and translations. His translations, natural, fluent, elegant, and refined, have made him one of the most popular American translators of Asian languages into English. His sinological research and translations cover areas such as Chinese classical philosophy, Buddhism, classical literature, and ancient historiography, especially the history of China [6]. Before translating Su Shi's works, he referred to *Lin Yutang's biography of Su Dongpo* to gain a clearer understanding of the historical background in which Su Shi lived. At the same time, he also consulted C.D. Le Gros Clark's translation of *Selected Poems of Su Shi* and was greatly inspired in terms of poetic language analysis. Due to Watson's lively translation style and writing that is close to the reading habits of English readers, his English translation of *Selected Poems of Su Dongpo* had a huge impact in the United States in the 1960s and reached a wide audience. Even in classical Chinese language teaching in the United States, his translation was the most widely used textbook. American scholar Lucas Klein emphasizes, "Watson has proven himself to be one of America's most prestigious translators of Asian classical literature." "His translations, appropriately, also aim at readers looking for an introduction to Chinese literature..." and his "aim was to make the most famous and influential passages of these texts available in easily readable form so that they could be read by English readers..." [7].

3. Framework of "Studies of Translation Dynamics"

Proposed by Professor Meng Xiangchun of Soochow University, Studies of Translation Dynamics is rooted in the theory of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements and grounded in the theoretical foundation of interactive force. It focuses on a dual seven-fold model addressing "In what context for what who says what to whom in what way with what effect and feedback," aiming to discover the forces and principles of translation. Fang Mengzhi advocates that as a major translation nation, China should possess an "original discourse system in translation studies", innovating in "thoughts", "categories", and "concepts" and "integrating internationally, exploring propositions, and refining concepts" [8]. In the context of the appeal for "Chinese School" translation theories and discourse in the new era and new contexts, Meng Xiangchun takes the perspective of communication studies, referring to the original author's writing process and the translator's translation process as communicative processes, ultimately manifesting as the dissemination of the original work into the target language. Harold Lasswell's 5W communication model (Who says what to whom in which way with what effect) has four major shortcomings in terms of "translation dissemination": lack of attention to external environments such as social conditions of communication, insufficient emphasis on communicative motives, inadequate consideration of cross-lingual and cultural communication, and insufficient focus on interactive systems [9]. Based on this, Meng Xiangchun summarizes the "translation dissemination" process as 7Ws (In what context for what who says what to whom in what way with what effect and feedback), namely, context, who, why, to whom, how, what is said, and effect and feedback, which is the "Seven-Whys Model".

3.1. "Covert Text"

According to Studies of Translation Dynamics, when readers experience the target text, if they have a sufficient experience of the source text, the textual experience often migrates from the source text to the target text, resulting in a convergence of experiences between the two. In this process, besides the explicit original text, "covert text" also plays a role in compensating for

textual experience. Different individuals gain different textual experiences from reading the same text. The richer an individual's knowledge reserve and reading volume, the richer their experience during reading, and the more covert texts they will evoked [9]. When readers have a thorough understanding of a country's language and culture, allusions can introduce them to the history of a nation, allowing readers to encounter various historical figures and experience historical events from different periods through reading. The knowledge related to history and culture that readers acquire through allusions is the "covert texts" within them. If allusions are not addressed in the translation process, it will be challenging for foreign readers raised in different cultures to understand their underlying meanings, let alone deeply appreciate the emotions conveyed by the poetry. In response to the phenomenon of "covert texts", translators must first have a deep understanding of the allusive backgrounds in the source text and clarify the functions of the allusions to accurately and faithfully translate them, displaying China's extensive and profound culture and history.

3.2. Case Analysis

The author analyses the translation strategies and methods employed in addressing the covert text phenomenon in allusions through the following examples from two translators. Version 1 is the target text from Xu Yuanchong, and version 2 is the text translated by Burton Watson.

3.2.1. Example 1

Original Text: 诵明月之诗，歌窈窕之章。

Version 1: I toasted my companions and recited the first verse of "The moon rises" from *The Book of Songs*.

Version 2: I hummed a poem to the moon and sang a phrase on its strange beauty.

In Example 1, "明月" and "窈窕" are allusive expressions. "明月之诗" refers to lines from Cao Cao's *Short Song of Joy* such as "明明如月，何时可掇" and "月明星稀，乌鹊南飞." Meanwhile, "窈窕之章" refers to the first chapter of "The Ospreys" from *The Book of Songs - Zhou Nan*, which reads, "窈窕淑女，君子好逑". Alternatively, it could refer to the poem *Moonrise from The Book of Songs - Chen Feng* [10]. Xu's translation adopts a foreignizing strategy, translating "明月之诗" as "The moon rises" from *The Book of Songs*, while omitting "窈窕之章". Xu's translation demonstrates a good understanding of the allusions and clarifies the source of "明月之诗", allowing readers familiar with Chinese culture to associate beyond the words and prompting unfamiliar readers to consult relevant sources based on Xu's hint. Version 2, on the other hand, uses free translation, interpreting "明月之诗" as "a poem to the moon" and "窈窕之章" in a similar manner as "a phrase emphasizing its strange beauty". This approach allows Western readers to grasp the essence of "窈窕" within their own cultural context but may fail to stimulate associations with the cultural background.

3.2.2. Example 2

Original Text: 渺渺兮予怀，望美人兮天一方。

Version 1: How deep my feelings are, since the person I most long for is far away on the other side of the world.

Version 2: Thoughts fly far away—

I long for my loved one

In a corner of the sky.

In Example 2, the term "美人" refers metaphorically to a person of virtue and talent. In ancient Chinese poetry, it is often used to express one's longing and aspiration for a certain person. Xu Yuanchong's translation as "the person I most long for" demonstrates that the translator has understood the covert texts behind the allusion, preserved the culture it conveys, and

accurately conveyed the meaning of “美人” in the original text to the readers. Waltham's translation as “I long for my loved one” may have resulted from uncertainty about whether the sentence contains an allusion, leading to some misunderstanding. It is a literal translation of the original text without restoring the associative meaning that the allusion provides.

3.2.3. Example 3

Original Text: 月明星稀，乌鹊南飞。

Version 1: The moon is bright, the few stars are scattered and the crows fly southward.

Version 2: The moon is bright, stars grow few,

Crows and magpies fly to the south.

The phrase “月明星稀，乌鹊南飞” originates from the four-character poem *Short Song on the Journey*. When faced with different allusions, translators should adopt different translation methods according to the context. Generally speaking, the method of free translation combined with annotation is preferred. This method can convey the literal content of the allusion to the greatest extent while introducing traditional Chinese culture. However, some allusions can retain their original images and connotations through literal translation into English, which can also be understood and accepted by English readers. In such cases, literal translation is the best approach ^[11]. In Example 3, both translators have adopted literal translation based on the original text, aiming to reproduce the style and characteristics of the source text in the translation. In the original Chinese text, “乌鹊” refers specifically to a type of bird, which can be translated as “crows” or “crows and magpies” for clarity in English, as done by Watson. Xu's translation also captures the essence of the phrase, but it's worth noting that “乌鸦” in Chinese culture often has a negative connotation, while in this context, it's part of a poetic image and should not be translated with its negative implications. Therefore, “crows” or “crows and magpies” (if the distinction between the two birds is intended) are both appropriate translations.

3.2.4. Example 4

Original Text: 此非曹孟德之诗乎？

Version 1: Were't these the words of Cao Mengde (Cao Cao)?

Version 2: That's how Ts'ao Ts'ao's poem goes, doesn't it?

In Example 4, “孟德” is historical figures in Chinese history. It refers to Cao Cao, whose style name is Mengde. Mr. Xu Yuanhong translates “孟德” as “Cao Mengde” and adds “Cao Cao” in parentheses, directly introducing this historical figure to foreign readers. This method not only preserves the original name but also provides additional information to help readers understand the context, while Watson translates it as “Ts'ao Ts'ao” using Wade-Giles pinyin, which was the most common Chinese pinyin method globally before the official Chinese phonetic alphabet (Hanyu Pinyin) was introduced. Considering that many readers may not be familiar with Chinese culture, Watson adopts a domestication strategy and chooses vocabulary that is easily understood by Western audiences to help them comprehend the text. Both translation strategies have their merits. Xu's translation retains the cultural specificity and provides additional information, while Waltham's translation prioritizes readability and accessibility for a broader audience. The choice of translation method depends on the intended audience and the purpose of the translation.

4. Conclusions

Drawing upon previous research, it can be observed that the covert texts proposed in Studies of Translation Dynamics is often implicit in Chinese allusions. By analysing two English translations of *The First Visit to the Red Cliff* we can see that different translators adopt different

translation strategies and methods for covert texts. Based on the above case studies, it is evident that Mr. Xu Yuanchong primarily adopts a foreignization strategy from the perspective of disseminating Chinese culture. He hopes to evoke associations among foreign readers who love Chinese culture by restoring famous Chinese allusions to their original context. On the other hand, Burton Watson, driven by his love for Chinese culture, consistently adopts a reader-oriented translation stance and also leans towards foreignization. He strives to use idiomatic English expressions in his translations, thereby bridging the gap between English readers and Chinese classics. His translations enable readers to approach and even immerse themselves in the original text, making significant contributions to the international dialogue of ancient Chinese classics.

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