

# On the Techniques of Translating Allusions\*

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Allusions are full of cultural connotations. How to make people in different countries understand each other? Translation will be one useful way. Translation is the bridge of cultural communication. How can translators translate allusions correctly? Firstly, translators should have a general idea about the specific cultural connotation of allusions. Each allusion has its own cultural background. Otherwise people would have difficulty in understanding allusions, and they may misunderstand them. Secondly, translators should try to find suitable methods in translating them. The result will be different if translators choose different methods.

*Keywords:* allusion, culture, translation, Chinese

## Introduction

According to the definition of allusions, every aspect in human social life can act as resource of allusions. Some allusions are from history stories and affairs. People often use some simple words to express the content of the stories, and as time passed, the simple words become allusions. Some allusions come from the oral tales. Many allusions come from the names of people and places. Allusions often use simple words, phrases, and short sentences. Compared with Chinese allusions, English allusions are more flexible. It can be long or short. Some English allusions are just one word, such as “Ark, Eden, Odyssey, Watergate”. Some are very long, such as “hair by hair you will pull out the horse’s tail” and “what one loses on the swings one gets back on the roundabouts”. Compared with English allusions, Chinese allusions are often four-character phrases. Most English and Chinese allusions are noun phrases. English allusions can often be looked as one complete sentence.

All allusions express some meaning. As English and Chinese allusions’ origins are almost the same, there are great similarities in the way of comparing. Using people’s names, places, and accidents’ names to make comparison is very common, such as “Uncle Tom, Jordon, Dunkirk, kick the bucket”. Some English and Chinese allusions are identical in both the structure and the meaning, such as “burn one’s boats” (破釜沉舟), “strike while the iron is hot” (趁热打铁), and “all the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full”(百川归海而海不盈). Some are partly the same or totally different, such as “walls have ears” (隔墙有耳), “kill the goose that lay the golden eggs” (杀鸡取卵), and “fine feathers make fine birds” (佛靠金装, 人靠衣装). As allusions have sharp national feature, when expressing the same meaning English and Chinese allusions may use different images, for example,

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“paint the lily” and “画蛇添足”. They all mean “to do unnecessary things”. In Western people’s eyes, lily is very pure. Making decoration to it is no benefit at all. Snakes have no feet. Adding feet to it will not make things better but worse. Another example is “a black sheep” and “害群之马”. English people who raise sheep do not like black sheep for it cannot be sold at a high price. Now a black sheep refers to a disgrace to the family or community. The Chinese allusions almost have the same meaning, but when people in these two countries have the same idea they may think of different things. These matters need to be considered when translating.

### Techniques of Translating Allusions

Before translating allusions, we must make sure to deal with the cultural features properly. As there are great differences in nature and society between Western and Eastern countries, people form different thinking patterns. English does not emphasize on subject but individual and logic. And they are used to abstract thinking. Chinese emphasizes on the whole, direct thinking, and subject and it often uses concrete thinking. These differences lead to different language forms and effects, for example, “Justice has long arms”. Maybe it is familiar to people. It compares laws’ effect to “long arms”. It may stimulate people’s imagination. But Chinese people may not understand the true meaning of it. It is often translated into “天网恢恢，疏而不漏”. People from different countries may not connect these two sentences together. People’s religious beliefs will be reflected in translation. Words like “god” and “devil” often appear in English allusions. In Chinese we can often find words like “Buddha”. There is one sentence “man proposes, god disposes” in Chinese. It is often translated into “谋事在人，成事在天”. “God” is changed into “heaven”, for people may not understand it with their own belief. Another aspect is that people in two countries have different imaginations about the same image. The word “vinegar” is a good example. In China people would think it stands for “envy”, but in English it may mean “bad temper” or “being unhappy”. So the sentence “his resort was delivered with a strong note of vinegar” means “he fight back angrily”. Look at another sentence “Mary and her mother are as like as two peas”. Maybe Chinese readers could not accept such expression. They would think it shows disrespect. Actually this sentence means “Mary and her mother look alike”.

As there are differences between English and Chinese cultures, we must consider the contradiction between two languages. We cannot translate allusions according to the literal meaning. Translating is not only interpreting. As we know, each allusion embodies so rich cultural information that we must understand the culture connotation in it and try to find out the most suitable way to translate. Translation is one complicated and challenging activity. It means transferring not only one language into another one simply, but also transferring different cultural connotations. It causes a problem. That is how to deal with the relation between language and culture. The relationship is intercultural communication. Language is clearly a part of culture. It is also one of its most distinctive features. Differences in culture mean differences in language. How to deal with these differences? There are two kinds of contrastive ideas: foreignization and domestication. In 1813, one famous Germany classic linguist and translation theorist wrote in his essay that “There are two principles in translating, one way is guiding the readers to understand the author, the other way is guiding the author to understand the readers”. These two principles are totally different and cannot be mixed up. In 1995 Lawrence Venuti gave the name “foreignizing method” to the first method, and “domesticating method” to the second method in *The Translator’s Invisibility*. These are two basic principles in translating. Maybe Venuti is the representative of foreignization. Nida is the

representative of domestication. People who prefer domestication say that attaching the language rules of the source language to the target language is impossible. Because translation is intercultural communication translators should avoid cultural conflict. If readers are familiar with the content being translated they will understand it better. Translators should not raise high request on the readers. From the communicative point, even foreignization is used, readers will use their own viewpoint to understand the content.

Domestication is a necessary means in translating. Between 1920s and 1950s, Chinese translators often used domestication method in translating for most of Chinese readers then knew little about Western culture. For example, “kill the goose that lays the golden eggs” was often translated into “杀鸡取卵”. “Fine feathers make fine birds” was often translated into “佛靠金装, 人靠衣装”. Nowadays we can often find the expressions: “like mushroom” (雨后春笋), “as stupid as a goose” (蠢得像猪), in some works. As Western people and Eastern people have different religious beliefs, we should pay more attention to the words like “god” and “devil” when we translate some Chinese works into English. But using domestication too much will make the readers feel confused, such as “God of Heaven”. If we translate it into “观音菩萨”, it is overdone.

Foreignization is an inevitable trend. Using this principle to translate is helpful to reveal cultural features. It pays more respect to the author. Foreignization can be carried on for the following aspects.

First, the readers’ ability to receive the information in the original should be considered. The purpose of translation is to transfer some message between the author and the reader. According to some theories, readers are no longer passive receivers. They receive the translation actively. This kind of reader is ready to gain new knowledge from the outside world.

People of any language-culture have sufficient imagination and experience to understand how the people of another language-culture may rightly differ in their behavior and values, since the behavioral differences within a single culture are usually greater than those which exist between cultures. (Nida, 2001, p. 79)

Take one of Shakespeare’s poems as an example, “shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”, this sentence makes comparison between one person and the weather. In England, the weather in summer is good. People who support domestication think if summer is not a good semester in some countries, the word “summer” should not be translated directly. But actually if readers understand the feeling when Shakespeare made this comparison, they would not think summer is hot in England as in their own countries and they may have a deeper impression on the culture of England. There are differences between places. When the directions “south, east, north, west” are mentioned, English and Chinese connotations about these are different. “Northwest”, “southeast”, these English sayings are contrastive to Chinese sayings. In people’s mind, “east wind” means “spring and warm”, but in England “east wind” means “cold and unpleasant”. The Englishmen hate “east wind” but they like “west wind”. If translators give some notes when translating, these notes will help readers to understand. Another example is “三个臭皮匠, 合成一个诸葛亮”. Most people in Western countries have no idea who “Zhuge Liang” is. The translation is “three cobblers with their wits combined would equal Zhuge Liang the master mind”. Here “the master mind” refers to “Zhuge Liang”. With their imagination, readers can understand. They may think “Zhuge Liang” is a person as wise as Solomon. As the development of cultural communication, translator should guide the readers to receive foreign culture.

Second, foreignization is connected with the development of translation theory. When translating we have to choose the suitable way, such as adding notes and making supplement. There is an allusion “Homer sometimes nods”. Using the domestication method it is translated into “智者千虑，必有一失”. But another version “荷马也有打盹的时候” is gradually accepted by people.

Foreignization and domestication are different principles. Must we choose one of them in translation? Or can we use both principles together? It depends on the basic tasks of translation and the requirement of translation. About this question, the English translation theorist, Tytler, raised three principles in *Essay on the Principles of Translation*.

First, the translation should give a complete transcription of the ideas of the original work. Second, the style and manner of writing should be of the same character with that of the original. Third, the translation should have the ease of the original composition.

Foreignization and domestication focus on different points. To transfer the thoughts and style of the original works correctly and completely, we must use foreignization. To settle language barriers, domestication method can be used. In China, Lu Xun and Qian Zhongshu made the similar conclusion. Yan Fu’s three principles of translation are “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” (信, 达, 雅).

The three principles of faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance should be understood not as competitive but as additive factors: First, faithful equivalence in meaning. Second, expressive clarity of form, and third, attractive elegance that makes a text a pleasure to read. (Nida, 2001, p. 127)

Experience proved that, to fulfill the double tasks of translation, the translator should be careful in choosing these two methods. Translation by foreignization not only tries to transfer what the original says faithfully, but also tries to reveal how it says for the purpose to represent the style of the original and introduce some expressions of source language. “Crocodile tears” and “one stone two birds” are very common allusions. “Crocodile tears” means “hypocritical”. It originates from W. Shakespeare’s play, *King Henry VI*, “Henry my lord is cold in great affairs, too full of foolish pity: An Gloster’s show Beguiles him as the mournful crocodile With sorrow snares relenting passengers; ...”. The former translators used domestication and translated these two allusions into “猫哭老鼠” and “一箭双雕”. Using foreignization we have the versions “鳄鱼眼泪” and “一石二鸟”. Besides the three principles in translating, there is another element that needs to be considered, that is recreation. In China, the traditional translation idea is faithful and it forms the special culture of translation in China. It was one kind of culture about standards of aesthetic judgment, habits of appreciation, and patterns of expression. This culture somewhat affected translators. That is why there are such obvious differences among translators. Translation viewpoint influenced the degree of foreignization.

### Conclusion

Allusions are widely used in modern society. Allusions are full of cultural connotations. Translation is a very important process of cultural communication. To make readers understand the original works better, translators should try to transfer the connotation within allusions as much as possible. Some English and Chinese allusions are much alike. But some are very different. There are some translation theories in history. Cultural differences bring difficulty in translating. Foreignization tries to reveal the original works to people as much as

possible. Domestication tries to make the version easy to be understood. Foreignization and domestication are two kinds of different principles in translation. Some people would think these are two contradictory methods. Actually these two methods are supplementary. If anyone wants to translate successfully, he must try to learn how to use these two methods flexibly. Translators should pay attention to the basic task and request of translation. Each principle has its own feature.

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