A Brief Analysis of Chinese-English Idiom Translation from a Cultural Perspective

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Idioms are the essence of language and a concentrated form of culture. As an important and core component of the linguistic world, they hold significant meaning and value for both academic research and practical application. Due to differences in political, cultural, historical, and regional backgrounds and characteristics, the existence, development, and usage of Chinese and English idioms vary, reflecting culture while also being influenced and constrained by it. In the translation process, a rigid, word-for-word translation of the cultural information in idioms may spark controversy. By analyzing the cultural values they reflect and comparing the cultural connotations of Chinese and English idioms, we can see the vast differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Therefore, only with a thorough understanding of the cultural characteristics of the East and West can one profoundly comprehend the meanings of Chinese and English idioms.

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I. The Relationship Between Language, Culture, and Translation

Translation has always been seen as a form of communication between languages. Some translation theorists, such as Hans J. Vermeer, strongly oppose viewing translation as a simple linguistic issue, instead considering translation primarily as a form of intercultural transfer or intercultural communication.

The first major issue encountered in the exploration of this intercultural communication is the disagreement on the vague yet intriguing concept of culture. There are as many as 200 definitions of culture, each with its own perspective. The most classic definition was proposed in 1920 by Edward Burnett Tylor, the father of cultural anthropology: From a broad anthropological perspective, culture or civilization is a complex whole, including knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by humans as members of society. This definition is all-encompassing and is one of his most well-known contributions to anthropology and the study of religion.

While scholars may have different views on culture, there are still some commonalities: both translation theorists and linguists agree that there is a close connection between language and culture. Vermeer believes that language is an inherent part of culture, and Mary Snell-Hornby also agrees with this view, especially when culture is defined as "the totality of knowledge, skills, and perceptions." British linguist John Lyons also believes that the language of a particular society is a part of its culture. He argues that the lexical distinctions of each

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language often reflect the characteristics of objects, institutions, and activities of significant cultural importance within the society where the language is spoken. Peter Newmark has a slightly different view of language and culture; he does not see language as a component of cultural characteristics but rather views culture as the unique way of life and its manifestations of a society that uses a specific language as a means of expression. Regardless of whether these theorists consider language as part of culture, they all acknowledge that language and culture are closely linked or interdependent. Therefore, it is not surprising that language and culture are sometimes referred to as "languaculture."

Since language and culture are interrelated, and translation is seen as a process of linguistic exchange and cultural transmission, it almost always requires the translator to have both bilingual and bicultural abilities. For true professional translation, bicultural ability is even more important than bilingual ability because words only have meaning within their cultural context, and understanding the source language text is influenced and constrained by culture. On the other hand, as a special reader and an insider of their own culture, the translator cannot always have the universal key to unlock all cultural locks. They cannot completely transcend the boundaries of their own cultural traditions to enter the world of others. Sometimes, they themselves may be too entrenched in their own cultural way of thinking to share other cultures. Therefore, the difficulty and quality of translation have more to do with culture than with language itself.

II. Comparative Studies on Cultural Aspects in Translation

The translator's understanding of the relevant cultures is consciously or unconsciously based on comparative studies of these cultures. In other words, translation implies cultural comparison. This comparison shows that the translator interprets the source culture phenomena from the inside or the outside based on their specific understanding of the source culture, depending on the direction of the translation, whether it is from the translator's mother tongue culture or the target language readers' mother tongue culture. Therefore, the concept of one's own culture will be used as a touchstone to perceive other cultures. Cultural comparison includes both similarities and differences in culture.

As anthropologists have pointed out, cultural similarities, such as the understanding of reciprocity and fairness in interpersonal relationships, the response to human goodwill and love, and the desire for the meaning of life, unite different nations in a common humanity, far exceeding the cultural differences that divide people into different groups. Due to similarities in psychological processes, physiological reactions, the range of cultural experiences, and the ability to adapt to the behavior patterns of others, highly effective communication can be conducted between all people. Most importantly, all people tend to reason in roughly the same way. For example, in discourse, the ordering of elements may vary greatly, but the basic logic of the resulting relationships is surprisingly similar. Despite differences, people can still imagine how others organize their thoughts and reasoning, and how people from another language and cultural background might differ in behavior and values. These factors that help translators cross cultural boundaries are what Wilss calls "universals." It is these cultural universals that provide the basis for mutual understanding, making translation and cultural exchange possible.

However, if we do not consider the many differences, sometimes astonishing differences, between cultures, we cannot face the translation issue fairly, because cultural diversity or cultural conflict is, after all, the main reason for the failure of intercultural communication. Cultural differences directly affect the understanding and

expression issues encountered in translation. Anything that is different from our own culture is specific to the other culture, and cultural differences, whether between languages that are closely related culturally or between languages that have only distant cultural connections, are differences in degree, not in kind. The gap between Chinese culture and Western culture is vast, with the most cultural factor differences and the least commonalities.

Exploring cultural differences requires an effective and more universal classification of culture because there are too many specific cultural phenomena to list one by one. However, the diversity of classification methods is no less than that of cultural definitions. Broadly speaking, culture is further divided into quasi-culture (norms, rules, and conventions valid for the entire society), subculture (norms, rules, and conventions valid for a specific group within society, such as clubs, companies, or regional entities), and idiot culture (individual culture relative to other individuals). Narrowly speaking, Newmark and Nida divide culture into five categories: ecological culture, material culture, social culture, religious culture, and language culture. This article prefers to classify culture from historical, geographical, customary, and religious perspectives. The following will illustrate the cultural differences between Chinese and English from a historical and cultural perspective.

Historical culture evolves with specific historical developments. It is the product of social heritage and varies with history. Some idioms involving specific historical figures pose challenges for translation. For example, if the Chinese idiom "东施效颦" is directly translated into English as "Dong Shi imitates a frown" or "Dong Shi imitates Xi Shi," foreigners will surely be puzzled, not knowing who Dong Shi and Xi Shi are, nor the meaning of the phrase. This idiom comes from a historical story in China: Xi Shi was a beautiful woman in the late Spring and Autumn period of the Yue state, who often frowned, showing a delicate temperament; Dong Shi, on the contrary, was extremely ugly and emphasized her own ugliness while imitating Xi Shi's frown. The meaning of this idiom is that someone who tries to imitate another person only emphasizes their own weaknesses. Considering the specific cultural connotations, "Dong Shi imitates a frown" should be translated as "The ugly Dong Shi blindly imitates the beautiful Xi Shi's frown, with a result that is both ridiculous and laughable," which makes sense.

III. Translation Methods for Cultural Characteristics

Given the huge differences between Chinese and Western cultures, the difficulties encountered in translation are understandable, especially when translating texts with distinct cultural characteristics or specific cultural customs. There are usually two opposite methods when translating such articles: one is literal translation, aiming to convey cultural information to the greatest extent; the other is to adapt to the target culture to evoke the greatest effect. In fact, neither of these methods is universally applicable in any situation. If literal translation is used inappropriately, it will plunge readers into a abyss of confusion, thus failing to achieve the purpose of translation. On the other hand, nationalizing foreign cultures for the benefit of readers can only bring temporary pleasure, at the cost of covering up cultural differences and eliminating cultural awareness due to different cultural backgrounds. In addition, they either overestimate or underestimate the readers' acceptance ability.

As a form of intercultural communication, the purpose of translation is to translate culture, building a bridge between the two worlds and two cultural realms of the source language author and the target language readers. Translation is the process of seeking the highest degree of cultural exchange through the translator's hard work of comparison, introduction, and absorption. Therefore, based on this insight, two translation criteria should be

noted: the amount of information and effectiveness, which constitute the degree of cultural exchange. In layman's terms, the more times the cultural information from the source language text is conveyed to the target language text, the greater the amount of cultural exchange information, especially in the case of huge differences, the more implicitly the cultural information is expressed, the more effective the cultural exchange is. Achieving a balance between the two is beneficial, but sometimes this task is indeed very challenging. When the two conflict, information is usually prioritized, with moderate effectiveness as a supplement, to convey as much cultural information as possible and achieve the purpose of cultural exchange.

Conclusion

Studying the impact of culture on translation may help to reveal issues in translation that are not disclosed by translation theories based solely on text and language. Without a systematic study of translation and culture, any so-called theoretical system of translation studies is incomplete. This paper focuses on the treatment of idioms and will reveal the translation of other cultural characteristics. It aims to pave the way for further in-depth research into the relationship between culture and translation.

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