

Translation of the Number "Nine" in Chinese Classics

Ling Zou^{1, a}, Jingjing Zhao^{2, b}

¹School of Foreign Languages, Jishou University, Zhangjiajie 427000, China;

²School of Foreign Languages, Jishou University, Zhangjiajie 427000, China.

^a1812717750@qq.com, ^b755254931@qq.com

Abstract

The number "nine" in Chinese classics boasts different historical origins and cultural connotations, which poses a great number of difficulties to translators. This paper studies the origin of the imaginary number "nine" from the cultural level to further understand and identify the connotation and extension of the number "nine" in Chinese classics. To that end, this paper summarizes three main translation methods: converting the number "nine" into another number people like (doing as the Romans do), free translation (adding or deleting the number), and interpretative translation (adding notes or paraphrasing).

Keywords

Chinese classics, the number "nine", translation methods.

1. Introduction

"Number is not exclusive in the conception of number" (Dexin Zhang, 1996). In Chinese classics, the number indicates the long history, broad and profound connotation of Chinese culture. In other words, one ordinary number "nine" covers rich and colorful "deep-level culture", which is the essence of Chinese culture. For a translator, it would be very difficult to accurately translate the culture behind the vague numbers without better understanding for cultural features.

In the world of science, there are strict and distinctive boundaries and certainty to identify each ordinary number. For example, each ordinary number can be classified according to its quantity and order, etc. It is known to all that numbers are not exclusive to themselves, which means the number not only serves as the function of basic computation in the field of science, it is also widely used in literature. In Chinese classics, the number "nine" can be widely used to express feelings and enhance mood serving as rhetorical methods such as metonymy, exaggeration, metaphor, etc. As a result, that has posed a large number of difficulties for translators as the number "nine" has been endowed with too many meanings in the long history of human development. Therefore, in order to fully convey the meaning behind the number "nine" in Chinese classics, it is vital for translators to find out its vague semantics in English translation rather than the number itself. In this connection, we need to further explore its rich connotation via analyzing specific context and deeply understand its real meaning in some certain context. Only by doing so, can the translators select appropriate translation methods to demonstrate its charming, language momentum and style, etc.

2. Real and Imaginary Numbers

"With the development of human thinking reaching a certain stage, the number is coming into on the basis of symbols so as to meet the needs of social production activities." (Jinzhi Su, 1991) "Numbers serve as special field of linguistics. In the scientific world, it is a real number used for the function of computing and counting. While in the world of human mind, it serves as an

imaginary number used to express ideas and feelings. After the process of deification, many numbers are endowed with new meanings like "imaginary number" and "days", which boast rich and complex denotations and connotations. (Bingqin Wang, 1998)

The culture on figures permeates all aspects of our daily life, including well-known historical allusions and myths as well as legends. According to the first Chinese dictionary *ShuowenJiezi*, compiled by Shen Xu in 121 A.D, we can gain the substantive answer about the number. To our surprise, the division of odd and even numbers coincides with the theory of Yin-Yang and Five-Elements. As the time goes by, some numbers have gradually developed into fixed and special images, which extend and enlarge their deep and profound connotations. To that end, the number "nine" discussed in this paper is one of the examples. When the number "nine" is used as an imaginary number, it widely refers to great amount with a unique phenomenon of semantic ambiguity. As one of the most mysterious figures in Chinese classics since ancient times, the number "nine" is indeed worth further exploring, said Mr. Yan Zhang in the Etymology.

3. A Contrastive Analysis on "Nine" Between Chinese and Western Culture

3.1. "Nine" in the East

3.1.1. Supreme

Since the ancient times, the number "nine" has been considered as the most mysterious number. To begin with, it was a shape of dragons (or snakes), and then transformed into a digital model, later evolving into sacred image. (Xiaojun Yang, Zhuying Yang, 1999) Legend has it that Chiyou tribe cited Jiutou Dragon as totem in ancient times to show its mighty power in the form of dragon, which is treated as the symbol of the supreme monarchy. In the case, the emperors of all dynasties strove to connect themselves with the number "nine" in order to show their supreme position. For example, "Jiuwuzhizun" and "Jiuwuzhiwei" are used to display the throne of the emperor; the government's symbol is "Jiuding", and the etiquette of the court appointment develops into "Jiuyi". It is recorded in the classics that the imperial clothes and buildings are also related to the number "nine". For example, there are nine broad gates in front of the Tian'anmen Rostrum, nine old gates surrounding the inner city of Beijing with nine rows of nails on the doors. The worship of the number "nine" continues to today for it is a symbol of supremacy and sacredness.

3.1.2. Forever

Homophone refers to the same or similar pronunciation of different words with different meanings. From the past to date, Chinese people have always believed that they would infiltrate and affect each other. The three words "九"、"久" and "究" are homophonic words, so they are endowed with permanent and ultimate connotation. The relevant evidence can be found in some classics. It is recorded that "nine means everything". The words "九" and "久" share the same pronunciation. when a single or limited voice presents different things and their attributes, the number "nine" naturally will be added the meaning of "Forever". (Qiu Li, 2003) Therefore, homophonic words, including "nine", are gradually endowed with similar meanings in the long process of advancement. In some case, it also symbolizes the vision that things will undergo a cycle of evolution after reaching the extreme point.

3.1.3. Extreme Point

According to the relationship between Yin-Yang and Five-Elements and the numbers, "nine" is the largest number of Yang. As an old saying goes, all things are deeply rooted in the number, and in turn the number consists of the universe. We all know that the natural number begins at 1 and ends at 10. According to the traditional Five-Elements theory, 1, 3, 5, 7 and 9 respectively represents yang-wood, yang-fire, yang-earth, yang-metal and yang-water. On the contrary, 2, 4,

6, 8 and 10 respectively represents their opposite sides. It can be easily found that "nine" serves as both the largest odd number and the largest positive number. In this connection, as long as people would like to convey the highest meaning, they may say "Jiuxiaoyunwai" and "Jiuchongtian". When they want to express vast and boundless meaning, they might use a metaphor "Jiuzhoufangyuan". Sometimes, if they wish to express freezing cold weather or an extreme point, they would say "Shujiuhantian" or "Jiujuguiyi".

3.2. "Nine" in the West

On the contrary, Westerners prefer to use even numbers rather than odd numbers. They regard even numbers as unlucky things while odd numbers as good fortune (except number thirteen). In their eyes, even numbers mean splitting or separating. Therefore, Western Christians must draw a cross with three fingers. When attending a wedding party, wedding flowers should be singular number to indicate good luck while funeral flowers must be double figures to show one's respect. As one of the divine numbers in the mind of Westerners, the number "nine" is often regarded as "holiness". There are more explanations on "nine" in English dictionary than those in Modern Chinese Dictionary. It is recorded that over 20 pieces proverbs and idioms are related to the number "nine". In the western countries, you can read Nine Heavens in Ptolemy astronomy, Nine Angels in the Bible and souls of virtuous people. The number "nine" is considered as a mysterious number which symbolizes the sacredness. Furthermore, it can also refer to the uncertain majority. Number "nine" and its multiples are widely used in the field of literature and sports such as nine holes in the chessboard of Chinese chess and nine pins in bowling.

4. Translation of Number "Nine" in Chinese Classics

4.1. Converting the Number "Nine" Into Another Number People Like (Do as the Romans Do)

Because of the differences in expression habits between English and Chinese, the same number can be used in different situations to express different concepts.

Source text: 亦余心之所善兮，虽九死其犹未悔。

Target text: If they were my ideals and pursuits, I'd never regret regardless of dying a thousand times.

The number "nine" here means many times. If literally translated into "nine times to die", it will undoubtedly cause reading obstacles for the target language readers and make it difficult for them to fully understand the author's intention. Therefore, the author believes that in such circumstances, the commonly used expression of the target language should be used instead: a thousand times to die - to die many times over, which is more acceptable to foreigners.

This is to fully display the cultural meaning behind the number "nine" by using the translation method of "Do as the Romans do". That is to say, it is not only a simple expression of "nine times", but also a vague word which means many times.

Similarly, "Ten to one" refers to the degree of ambiguity with great possibilities. "Ten to one", the overwhelming advantage of 10 to 1, refers to the very likely flavor of ten to one, which is exactly the same as that of "Eighty-Nine" in Chinese classics, so it can be transformed here. Of course, not all number "nine" in Chinese classics can be translated into the target language to find the corresponding digital conversion. Sometimes forcibly translating the numbers in Chinese classics would be counterproductive. At this time, the author believes that addition or omission can be good ways for translation of numbers.

4.2. Free Translation (Adding or Deleting the Number)

In the book *On Translation*, Zengrui Qiao expounds the meaning and characteristics of free translation in detail. He argues that the same or similar expressions in the target language can replace the relationship between contents and forms that cannot be retained in the original because of the differences of two languages. We strive to achieve "form is scattered but spirit is united" which is adapting to the style of the original work without losing the original content. (Zengrui Qiao, 2000)

Source text: 匡超人此时恍若亲见瑶宫仙子，月下嫦娥，那魂灵都飘到九霄云外去了。

——《儒林外史》

Target text: At the moment, Kuang was gazing at a fairy and then his soul suddenly flew to heaven.

Jiuxiaoyunwai: outside the heaven, contains a metaphor for an infinite place or a distant place without a trace. Number "nine" here is not like an ordinary number just like what we usually use but actually a vague expression, referring to a very high place. Therefore, the author believes that the number should be omitted in the process of translation, which would show not only the "economic principles of language" of human communication and exchanges, but also the importance of idioms.

Source text: “死去原知万事空，但悲不见九州同”

——《离骚》

Target text: I know all my hopes are vain after dying, but I'm so upset not to witness the unity of our country.

"Jiuzhou" was first seen in the book *Yugong*, one of ancient Chinese classics. According to legend, when the ancient official Dayu governed water, the world was divided into nine states, so Jiuzhou has become a synonym of China from that time. "Jiuzhou" is not difficult for Chinese people to understand, but if we keep the number in the translation of nine states, target readers who don't know much about Chinese history would be a little confusing about it. Because the symbolic meaning of "Jiuzhou" is the country and has a deep sense of solidarity, translators, especially foreign translators of Chinese classics, should try their best to convey the historical and cultural meaning behind the numbers accurately in translation.

Source text: “老太太因明年八十一岁，是个暗九。”

——《红楼梦》

Target text: It's said that the elder woman will probably suffer from misfortune at her age of 81 in the next year.

Chinese ancients with nine for the sun count, so the number "nine" has always been considered as bad omen. For example, when people are at the age of nineteen, twenty-nine, thirty-nine and other multiples of number "nine", the host will invite many relatives and friends to gather together to attend a banquet to entertain guests and remove mildews. In addition, when it comes to the age of multiple of "nine", especially 27 years old, 63 years old, 72 years old and 81 years old, etc. "Dark nine age" in people's eyes, they usually go to Shenchi Temple or other divine temples to worship Buddha and burn incense, praying for disaster relief and good fortune. For a long time, this tradition of worship and sacrifice has gradually been preserved and inherited from generation to generation. In order to enable readers to understand the real meaning of "dark nine", free translation (adding or deleting the number), would be adopted here. Based on the accurate grasp of the original information and the accurate understanding of the information, the translator breaks away from the obstacle of the language, and then through a series of transformations, reconstitutes and expresses his ideas and contents.

The phrase of “费了九牛二虎之力” in the Chinese-English Dictionary refers to "use every ounce of one's strength". (Foreign Research Institute, 1996) The author believes that the omission translation of numbers is more in line with the principle of nationality. The unique metaphorical meaning of idioms in Eastern culture is skillfully transformed from the well-known images in Western cultural languages. But sometimes when translating some classics, it is difficult to fully convey the cultural flavor contained in the number "nine" by adding or deleting numbers, so we need to take the method of adding notes for further explanation.

4.3 Interpretative translation (adding notes or paraphrasing)

Lack of cultural background knowledge or differences in language expression would undoubtedly cause many problems for readers. Besides, it is not easy for all the readers to truly understand the translation, so they should make more efforts to learn the relevant background knowledge. Therefore, Newmark, a famous translation theorist, once said that explanation can be regarded as translation when it is absolutely necessary. (New mark, 1982)

Source text:

高山打鼓远闻声，三姐唱歌久闻名。
二十七文钱摆三注，九文九文又九文。

Target text:

The sound of drums on high mountains travels away,
Third Sister Liu has long been famous for her singing;
Twenty-seven coins stand by three lines,
Nine coins by nine coins is well-known !

From the above examples, the numbers are used in a clever way and the well-known arithmetic rules are skillfully used in the translation. The three figures of speech, namely "number analysis", "repetition" and "pun", are integrated in a comprehensive way in the examples. Decomposition of "twenty seven" into three groups of decimal "nine" and use number "nine" for three consecutive times, naturally achieving a homophonic pun with "Jiuwen". Meanwhile, it implies that the girl Sanjie have been famous for a long time, which is really exquisite. But it is not easy to translate these seemingly simple lyrics into authentic English without losing "meaning" or "effectiveness".

In addition, "Jiuzu" is also a very common expression in some Chinese classics. After looking up in to the dictionary, this word can be translated as an annotation (the nine degrees of kinship: four generations of one's parental relationship; or nine generations from one's great-great-grandfather down to one's great-great-grandson.) Of course, such an annotation method will not appear in the text, usually it serves as a footnote at the bottom of the text without affecting the reader's view of reading, only giving the reader a choice of further explanation.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper only makes a simple analysis on the deep connotation and origin of the number "nine" in Chinese classics, and gives a brief overview of its culture in the East and the West. It can be easily concluded that the translators can not simply equate "九" to "nine" lies in that the number "nine" is full of spiritual worship, religious beliefs, humanistic feelings, etc. in the human mind. As a result, the number "nine" has been endowed with a very rich extension and connotation symbolizing "numerous", "supreme" and "permanent" meanings and others in the traditional the Chinese culture. To that end, this paper summarizes three main translation methods about the number "nine": converting the number "nine" into another number people like (doing as the Romans do), free translation (adding or deleting the number), and interpretative translation (adding notes or paraphrasing). However, it should be pointed

out that digital translation in the real context is not less than a translation method but at least two or more. It is just because, in different contexts, the number "nine" no longer refers to the real number "nine", but to the vague semantics. Now that there are a thousand Hamlet in the heart of a thousand translators, it's no wonder that the same number can be translated into several visions.

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