

A Brief Analysis of the English Translation version of Ken Liu's The Three-Body Problem Based on the Theory of Functional Equivalence

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Abstract

As Chinese science fiction gradually expands its influence overseas, the translation of science fiction plays an increasingly important role as a bridge. The purpose of this essay is to explore the translation of Chinese science fiction from the perspective of translation methods, so as to help Chinese science fiction expand its influence.

Keywords

Translation methods; Annotation; Free translation; Substitution.

1. Novel Synopsis

The Three-Body Problem is a science fiction novel written by Chinese author Liu Cixin and translated into English by Ken Liu. The story is mainly written in the perspective of Miao Wang, a nanomaterials scientist. He plays a game called The Three-Body that reveals the overview of three-body galaxies, three-body lifestyle, scientific boundaries, and ETO. He is abandoned in this wild game and wonder why it performs in this way. But many people are encountered with life threat, some even died, including Yang Dong, Ye Wenjie's daughter. In order to know something about the cosmic background radiation, he goes to visit Ye Wenjie. Then the story comes to the past, which reveals the secret of the three-body problem. When the secret begins in the 1960s, China is in the midst of its Cultural Revolution in which various factions in the Communist Party – especially among younger members – accuse one another of not being radical enough. Many people died in the havoc, including Ye Wenjie's father, a great physicist, and her mother was crazy after her father's death. Ye Wenjie, an academic in the field of astrophysics herself, is forcibly conscripted into a unit of Chinese civilians responsible for deforestation near Radar Peak.

Ye is then brought to the top secret military project "Red Coast Project", she meets Yang Weining and Commissar Lei here. At first, she regards that Commissar as her guide, and trusts his words, while Chief Yang is always strict to her. But nothing is the way it should be. Commissar Lei cheat her and doesn't tell her the truth. She has to devote all her life in this Red Coast Base. After working in this place for quite a year, Ye Wenjie used the sun as an antenna to send out the first cry of earth civilization to the universe, making a breakthrough in the search for alien civilization. Ye learned of the existence of Trisolaris, learned of the civilization that had been reborn again and again, and learned of their plan to migrate to the stars. Ye Wenjie of despair to human nature revealed the coordinate of the earth to trisolaran person, changed the destiny of mankind thoroughly.

2. Translation Methods of Chinese Cultural Words and Phrases

2.1. Introduction

The professor Liao Qiyi (2002) defines the culture words in such way that the words, phrases and idioms that was created and accumulated in the long-term development of civilization by

their special cultural activities. And they can be seen as the typical representation of Chinese culture. [1]China is deeply influenced by the traditional culture and literature is rooted in the soil of traditional culture. Set against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution, *The Three-Body Problem* includes a large number of cultural-background words, which add a cultural dimension to the science fiction novel. Owing to the cultural differences between Chinese and Western cultures, the cultural words have a direct impact on readers' understanding of the novel, which requires translators to use different translation techniques for these cultural words to reduce the gap with the source culture. The reason why Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* won the Hugo Award for Long Novels comes from the whimsical ideas of the author Liu Cixin on the one hand, and from Ken Liu's superb translation techniques on the other hand, which makes overseas readers read *The Three-Body Problem* with fascination. According to Xuhao(2017) who studied the cultural words and phrases in *The Three-Body Problem*, he concluded that about 40 percent cultural words and phrases takes literal translation and 30 percent words takes annotation and free translation methods. And there exists some cultural words and phrases that using the substitution method. It can turn Chinese words and phrases into English idioms skillfully. [4] *The Three-Body Problem* mainly has following three translation methods: annotation, free translation and substitution. Using annotation can solve the translation problems in Chinese cultural words and phrases. It also can make readers to know about the cultural background. Free translation can adjust and adapt the word order and rhetorical devices of the original language without being bound by the structure of the original language to better convey the artistic effects of the original language and enable the readers to have similar aesthetic experiences as the readers of the original language had when reading the original language. Substitution can transform the original expression to the target-language expression. Readers can understand the work more easily and culturally.

2.2. Translation Methods

2.2.1. Annotation

Annotation is a translation method mainly used in the following situations: One is that there is no complete correspondence between two things, but it cannot be replaced by transliteration. Second, the part is unfamiliar to ordinary readers, and a clear explanation will affect readers' understanding of the source text. In this book, there are 24 footnotes of Chinese cultural terms, the purpose of which is to provide western readers with more detailed and clearer cultural background knowledge.[2]

Example 1:

ST: 独臂女人接着说：“在清华校园的百日大武斗中，我们四个人，两个在‘井冈山’，两个在‘四一四’。” (Liu Cixin, 2008:226)

TT: The one-armed woman took over. “During the Hundred. Day War at Tsinghua, two of us were with the Jinggang Mountain Crops, and the other two were with the April Fourteenth faction.

Translator's Note:

The Hundred-Day War at Tsinghua University: was one of the most violent Red Guard civil wars during the Cultural Revolution. Fought between two Red Guard factions, it lasted from April 23 to July 27 in 1968. Melee weapons, guns, grenades, mines, cannons, etc. were all used. In the end, eighteen people died, more than eleven hundred were wounded, and more than thirty were permanently disabled. (Ken Liu, 2014:301)

Analysis: The sentence describes those people's different positions during an event called “百日大武斗” and the word “百日大武斗” is a cultural word belong to China and appeared in a specific time. In this sentence, “百日大武斗” contains both the information of politic and history, and arises during the Cultural Revolution, if it is just translated freely and literally, the cultural

and political meaning cannot be conveyed, and foreign readers cannot get into the story, so it has its annotation, which is the best way to explain its original meaning and translate it into "Hundred Day War". With the annotation, story can become vivid, and readers can get the meaning of this word directly and learn more history behind the surface of the word, which will help broaden their horizon. Besides, the annotation can explain it clearly to the foreign readers and make them close to the story, feeling the cultural background of the story directly.

Example 2

ST:“你好，我是墨子。”(Liu Cixin, 2008:102)

TT: "Hello," the man said. "I'm Mozi."

Translator's Note: Mozi was the founder of the Mohist School of Philosophy during the Warring States Period. Mozi himself emphasized experience and logic, and was known as accomplished engineer and geometer. (Ken Liu, 2014:140)

Analysis: Mozi was a famous philosopher and thinker in ancient China, with Mohism as his biggest achievement. But unlike Confucianism, Mohism was not so influential, many foreigners do not know Mohism, so with annotation below, people can know more about Mozi and his status in Chinese history. Besides, in this passage, it describes the male leading role plays a VR game and meets Mozi in this game, who is the leader in the game world, without annotation, readers can not experience the shock and eerie of the game scene. The annotation can not only increase readers' knowledge, but increase the mystery of the passage and enhance the interest of readers.

2.2.2. Free Translation

Free translation is a translation method that explains the term directly according to the general idea of the original text rather than literal translation. The free translation is adopted in translating sentences, phrases or the words that are difficult to understand in the source text for the foreign readers.[2]

Example 3:

ST:现在，上级对这本书已经做出了明确的定性:这是一部反动的大毒草。(Liu Cixin,74)

TT: As for now, the appropriate authorities have already given their clear judgment: This book is a toxic piece of reactionary propaganda. (Ken Liu, 33)

Analysis: In the example, Ken Liu translates “毒草” into “propaganda”. In the traditional culture, it refers to a kind of poisonous herbs. If a direct translation is used, foreign readers will think that it is a kind of poisonous grass and they understand them through their own thinking pattern. However, the author of the original text does not express this meaning, but another implied meaning. The author wants to express that the book is harmful to the society. Ken Liu uses free translation skill and translates it into propaganda. Propaganda is information, often inaccurate information, which a political organization publishes or broadcasts in order to influence people.[5] It is a political word to adapt to the background of the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution, which can express the true meaning of the cultural words. When foreigners read the book, they will understand the book is very harmful.

Example 4:

ST:这本书引起了上级的重视，要搞内参，我负责翻译与森林相关的那部分。(Liu Cixin, 2008:10)

TT: The book attracted the attention of the higher-ups. They want to distribute it to select cadres for internal reference. I'm responsible for translating the part that has to do with forests. (Liu, 2014:23).

Analysis: In the example, Ken Liu translates “搞内参” into “internal reference”. It is a political word in China. If a direct translation is used, it is quite difficult for those who do not know the

history of China at that time. The translator coincidentally uses the method of paraphrase to translate the cultural word into a phrase familiar to foreigners, effectively avoiding this problem. It fits the foreigners' reading habits and life experiences.

Example 5:

ST:刚从城市来到这陌生的世界时，很多兵团知青都怀着一个浪漫的愿望。(Liu Cixin, 2008:67)

TT: When they first left the cities and arrived at this unfamiliar wilderness, many of the corps and "educated youth" - young college students who no longer had schools to go to-had cherished a romantic wish. (Ken Liu, 2014:23)

Analysis: In the examples, Ken Liu translates "知青" into "educated youth". The cultural words is related to the specific history period. However, the history is unfamiliar with foreigners. Using the method of free translation, educated youth is familiar to foreigners. Readers can better learn about the meaning of background of the Cultural Revolution. So the translator try his best to bring the true meaning to the readers.

2.2.3. Substitution

Example 6:

ST:"小叶啊，我跟你交个底吧。你这个案子，弹性很大的..."(Liu Cixin, 2018:78)

TT: "Wenjie, let me put all my cards on the table. Your case has a lot of prosecutorial discretion..." (Ken Liu,2014:38)

Analysis: We can make a conclusion from the sentence above. "Put all my cards on the table" in English is a substitute for "我跟你交个底吧" in Chinese. "我跟你交个底吧" is a traditional Chinese saying. It is often talked about by people in their daily life to express their true feelings and thoughts in their mind. The literal meaning of this phrase is putting my own cards on the table for showing them to each other. However, the potential meaning of this phrase is talking about all the things I have known to each other. So this translation is using the method called substitution. In my prospective, there is the reason why we use this method. There are different cultures between western countries and China. If we translated the phrase literally, many foreign readers would not understand the meaning conveyed. We must adapt the translation of this phrase to the foreign culture. Consequently, we use substitution to translate this phrase. It is beneficial to have a better understanding. Then it could convey the meaning clearly. And here we can quote what the DR Liu said. [2] Unlike common words, Chinese sayings includes more cultural information that is different from common words. Using the idiom in English, it will make language more beautiful and achieve the fusion of horizons.

Example 7:

ST:其实，就在这近乎世外桃源的雷达峰上，人类的非理性和疯狂仍然每天都在历历在目。(Liu Cixin, 2018:200)

TT: Indeed, even on top of Rader Peak, a place the world almost forgot, the madness and irrationality of the human race were constantly on display. (Ken Liu,2014:235)

Analysis: The sentence is using the " a place the world almost forgot" in English to substitute "世外桃源" in Chinese. This translation of this example is discrepant from the first example above. The first example is a complete substitution of another expression to explain the meaning conveyed by Chinese. However, this example is more of an explanation of the meaning of the term "世外桃源". It explains in English that the word means a place that people will forget. As a matter of fact, there are many different meanings of paradise in Chinese. There are expressions for a place that is beautiful and attractive; there are also expressions for a place that is more remote and gradually forgotten. This translator chose the second meaning according to the general meaning of the context in the text, and this meaning is also the most

apt. This interpretive alternative translation method better conveys the meaning of some Chinese cultural words and deepens readers' understanding of them.

Example 8:

ST: “怎么样老弟，扛不住了吧？我说你不成吧，你还硬充六根脚趾头。”(Liu Cixin,94)

TT: “So how’s it going. Buddy? Finding it hard to hear? I said you couldn’t handle it. And you insisted on playing the tough guy.”(Ken Liu,131)

Analysis: “你还硬充六根手指头” in Chinese is a regional cultural colloquialism, which means to describe a person who is conceited and self - righteous。 It means someone who does not have the ability to do something, but pretends to do it as if he has enough ability. And in English, we translated this phrase to “insist on playing the tough guy”. [2] In the English version, “tough guy” is the American slang means “硬汉子”. They have the similar meanings. So they can substitute each other. This method helps foreign readers to know the meaning in their familiar ways. And it can be close to the horizon of expectations and achieve the fusion of horizons.

3. Overseas Impact

In his dissertation, Dr. Shona Fu writes about three characteristics of the overseas spread of The Three-Body Problem. [6] The first is the professionalization of the means of communication - the translation "faithfully" conveys the "original" culture. The second is the internationalization of communication content: breaking through the creative barriers to the overseas dissemination of Chinese literary works. The last one is the power of communication media. Our paper focuses on the first feature, the theory of functional equivalence. We focused on three different translation approaches used in The Three-Body Problem. Regardless of the methods, the following characteristics are followed. They are faithful to the original and convey the culture respectively. Because that doing these two things our overseas readers will more effectively capture the larger meaning of the book and the important ideas it is trying to convey. Based on the above, and some related thesis materials, we can conclude some advantages and disadvantages of The Three-Body Problem in overseas dissemination, as well as the scope of influence and the degree of influence in overseas nowadays.

First of all, Chinese culture and foreign culture is linked together in a witty way to make the transition between two different cultures, so that readers can easily feel the interface between the two cultures, thus continuously deepening the impact of Chinese culture on readers. Second, a large number of domestic and foreign science fiction enthusiasts used the Internet as a platform to combine their life experiences and whimsical ideas with the book, and to "reproduce" the original work by interpreting and debating it, which greatly increased the attention to The Three-Body Problem and expanded its influence in foreign science and technology circles. However, some of our immaturity in translation and some international discrimination issues makes it difficult for our science fiction to have an aggressive impact on the international market. This is a very serious challenge for us. Maybe we can change the medium of communication so that it is transmitted in a film and television way. All kinds of measures will increase its impact overseas.

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