

The Coexistence of Defamiliarization and Readability in the English Translation of Six Chapters of a Floating Life by Lin Yutang

Yuan Deng

School of Foreign Languages, Lanzhou University, Lanzhou, Gansu, China

Abstract

Embracing a unique aesthetic view of life, Lin Yutang eulogizes the pastoral lifestyle depicted in the Six Chapters of a Floating Life. However, among the majority of studies concerning this translation, two significant yet conflicting factors, that is, defamiliarization and readability, are rarely mentioned on an equal footing. Therefore, taking into consideration the translator's factors, this paper aims to give testify to the possible coexistence of defamiliarization and readability in this translation and thus their essential roles leading to its success through a detailed analysis of typical examples. Generally, the paper will tap into this translation in a fresher manner as an attempt to illustrate multiple research perspectives in similar works with distinct Chinese characteristics.

Keywords

Coexistence; Defamiliarization; Readability; Six Chapters of a Floating Life.

1. Introduction

As a rare genius throughout the Chinese history, Lin Yutang is hailed as a pioneer holding high the banners of national consciousness and cultural confidence. While calling for scientific advancement, he revels in the beauty of nature, pursuing the idyllic lifestyle described in the Six Chapters of a Floating Life authored by Shen Fu. Harboring the passionate love for it, Lin Yutang translated it and thus aroused buzz in foreign countries. In fact, many researches have been carried out to explore his translation methods in terms of culture, social acceptance and communication effects. Nevertheless, fewer studies delve further into the intrinsic elements of the translator himself and associate his personal factors with his concrete translation practice. Hence, the paper works to explain two major causes contributing simultaneously to the success of Lin's translation with his consideration of both the source culture and readership as potential background. Specifically, the coexistence of these two causes, say, "defamiliarization" and "readability" is not only possible, but also a combined strength underpinning the success of this translation. The paper will display favorable conditions for the coexistence of two factors and then make a deep analysis of their effects through examples.

2. Defamiliarization

Before the main body is elaborated, it's necessary to explain what is "defamiliarization" first. It's a coined word created by Victor Shklovsky, a literary formalist in Russia. Applied exclusively in literature since its inception, it refers to endowing ordinary objects with odd effects by leveraging novel artistic skills, so that readers can obtain an unfamiliar yet extraordinary reading experience. Defamiliarization plays a proactive role in enabling readers to make new discoveries even in the face of "topoi". Actually, its earliest application can be traced back to Aristotle who used "wonder" to underscore the peculiarity of language or plot (2003). After that, this concept had received appreciation from a host of people including Giagomo Mazzoni,

Joseph Addison and also Hegel (Chen&Zhang,2006:92). Besides, Bertolt Brecht went far beyond aesthetics years after Shklovsky and unraveled the alienation effects in theatrical performance. Later, “defamiliarization” is introduced into translation as a way to retain exotic touch in the target text. According to Edwin Gentzler (1990:147), “Translation Studies prescribes that a work in translation retain defamiliarization devices, and if existing devices cannot be transposed in the second language, the translator needs to invent new ones.” Similarly, Chinese scholar Sun Yifeng (2003:3) holds that defamiliarization, as a conscious act of transgression, should be encouraged and preserved in translation. In a nutshell, defamiliarization seeks to obtain proximity of the original text by clinging to its indigenous favor, hence posing “obstacles” to readers’ understanding. Specifically, it is thorough alienness and hybridity that defamiliarization is fully achieved. In fact, the former finds much common ground with Lawrence Venuti’s foreignization while the latter means to provide two languages with equal opportunities to display their features in the target context.

3. Possible Conditions for the Coexistence of Defamiliarization and Readability in This Book

Born in a rural dean’s family, Lin Yutang received his primary and higher education in church schools all the way. He once confessed that he was “ashamed of his ignorance of Chinese culture” (Ge&Ji,2001:72). Nevertheless, during his teaching career, he read a large volume of ancient Chinese classics and started to run a Chinese magazine. Filled with absolute sincerity and fervent admiration towards Chinese culture, he spent up to 35 years unrelentingly spreading national elements to the wider world. For his part, he pursued the unfettered and pastoral life advocated by his ancestors with great perseverance, as was evidenced by “focusing on selfhood and giving priority to leisureliness” (Lin,1998:202). Despite Christian edification, Lin’s works and speech are perfect embodiments of Chinese culture complex including *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*. In this autobiographical prose, Shen Fu and his wife Chen Yun spend an otherworldly joyful life idling in nature and chasing for enormous spiritual enrichment. However, such a harmonious conjugal relation is rarely found in previous literary works in which anecdotes or love tragedies under the oppression of feudal ethics are described. In this case, driven by intrinsic affection for the story, Lin Yutang deliberately produced defamiliarization in his translation to revitalize and flourish Chinese culture in the heterogeneous western circumstances.

When it comes to readability, sinologist Howard Goldblatt once said that a translator should be faithful to all parties including the author, the text and readers...but it is of paramount importance to meet readers’ needs (Ji,2009:46). Meanwhile, Lin Yutang believes that “translation is a fine art” (Luo,1984:429), which implies that ideal translation must take into full account the aesthetic value and try every means to restore its original romantic charm. That is to say, readability matters as it lays the foundation for artistic appreciation. Additionally, readers’ reading experience and acceptance of the translation are bound to be frustrated if the translator remains committed to the defamiliarization only. Therefore, it is the translator’s obligation to make necessary adjustments to better serve readability in the face of dilemma.

As Qian Zhongshu puts it, “there are thousands of miles between the original text and the target text, so as for the translator, he needs to take every step forward and go on an arduous journey before he finally reaches the destination—another language.” (Qian,1981:19) Therefore, the focus of Lin Yutang lies in when he should strike a balance between defamiliarization and readability to reach his “destination”.

4. Primary Role of Defamiliarization in the English Translation of This Book

It has been mentioned that defamiliarization is achieved by means of alienness and hybridity. As regards to alienness, original factors are maintained in the target culture in an offbeat way; while hybridity, just as its name implies, refers to reflecting features of two languages simultaneously. For the reasons above, following examples from *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* will be illustrated to manifest how essential a role the defamiliarization has played in translation.

4.1. Alienness

With moldy expressions replaced, the purpose of alienness is to urge readers to digress from rituals and come to acquire a new experience. In this situation, the translator stands firmly on the foothold of the author and speaks for him.

Example 1: 主考出五七言各一句，刻香为限.....

Translation: The examiner then gave out a line of seven words and one of five words...the time limit was the burning of a joss-stick...

This sentence depicts a pompous and hilarious scene when ancient literati gathered together to recite poems and make couplets for entertainment. It's worth noting that the tradition of joss-stick burning is unfamiliar to foreign readers. In ancient China, joss-stick was often found in sacrifice occasions and temples in that monks often burned a stick to record the time when they sat in meditation. Thanks to its small size and multiple functions, the custom of burning joss-stick as a timekeeping method was gradually met with popularity. On the contrary, utterly different timekeepers were used in ancient western world, such as sundial, single pendulum mechanical clock and hourglass. In this context, Lin directly transplants the culture-loaded expression to provoke readers' strong interests in unique timekeeping tradition in ancient China, which is helpful in facilitating the interaction between two cultures.

Example 2: 世传月下老人专司人间婚姻事.....

Translation: It is said that the Old Man under the Moon is in charge of matrimony...

At the first glance of it, readers are probably baffled why the "old man under the moon" has such a magical power. However, as they are delving further into the connotation of this image, they will find that it is an extremely figurative expression with rich Chinese characteristics. This fairy tale can be traced back to as early as 1,400 years ago when Wei Gu encountered an old woman looking up a tome beside a sack under the moonlight. She confided to him that no matter how far apart a man and a woman were, they would get married as long as they had their feet tied with a red rope. Since it takes painstaking efforts to elaborate this time-honored story for readers, it is reasonable to preserve the original fable intact as a suggestive clue. Akin to this, "荷叶下仙人" (1999:258) is rendered into "Fairy under the lotus leaves", another manifestation of defamiliarization. Although readers cannot grasp the essence behind allusions immediately, they, with their interests sparked, can still have a full comprehension by referring to relevant materials.

Example 3: 古人所谓“画栋雕甍”，“珠帘绣幕”，“玉阑干”，“锦步障”，不啻过之。

Translation: ...suggesting to me the "painted beams and carved girders," "beaded curtains and embroidered screens," "jade railings," and "screens of [women in] embroidered shoes" mentioned in ancient literature.

Here, the author borrows charm of Chinese classic architecture to highlight the bustling and luxuriant atmosphere in his local district. It is clear that four terms all composed of the adjective-noun structure are basically rendered word for word in translation. Despite terse Chinese diction, Lin Yutang recreates the grandeur and delicacy of ancient buildings by using

equally refined English expressions—“painted”, “beaded”, “carved”, “jade” and “embroidered”. Far from causing a damage to the meaning, such original text-based translation carves out a new way for readers to learn about basic components and typical styles of Chinese architecture in as uncomplicated a way as possible. Furthermore, considering that Shen Fu was in high spirits when he indulged in clamor with friends, his description of the objects must be succinct and lightsome. Thus, it can be concluded that Lin’s translation reaches a conformity to author’s state of mind.

Apart from that, an array of transliterated words has appeared as a forceful representation of defamiliarization, such as “P’iloch’un”, “Ts’anglang Pavilion”, “Ch’ient’ang”, “Soochow” and “Fuch’un River”. With nearly all of them unique cultural terms, Lin remains dedicated to keeping them complete in his translation as part of his efforts to introduce Chinese culture to the outside world.

4.2. Hybridity

Unlike alienness which stands by absolute exoticism, hybridity adopts a milder attitude in dealing with different cultures. It requires the translator to stand impartially in the middle ground between readers and the author, which indicates that he needs to assume obligations to both sides by incorporating bilingual features.

Example 4: 正谊书院犹未起启也。

Translation: The Chengyi College was erected on the spot, but it wasn’t there yet.

First established in the Tang Dynasty by the royal family, “书院” initially acted as a reliable “think tank” for the emperor. Later in the Song Dynasty when it had gained an unprecedented momentum, both the central government and individuals were authorized to open it and meanwhile, they were permitted to invite distinguished scholars and recruit students. In this way, it evolved into a specialized venue for lecturing and reading. While in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it was used as an officially designated place for holding imperial examinations. Nevertheless, such a concept rich in historic meaning finds no equivalent in the target language as a result of cultural vacuum. Given that this secondary information exerts little impact on readers’ overall comprehension, it makes sense that the translator narrows down its meaning and simply renders it into “College”. Besides, “College” is more compatible with the context as what the protagonist Yun meant was that the “正谊书院” hadn’t started a new semester yet, indicating the fact that it functioned as an educational institution. Additionally, it is worth noting that the title “Chengyi” is added to preserve the quaint feature of the original work. Having read this hybrid translation, readers come to know both the name and purpose of this unique organization in Chinese history.

Example 5: 故上下呼芸为“三娘”，后忽呼为“三太太”。

Translation: ...hence they used to call Yün “san niang” at home, but this was later suddenly changed into “san t’ ait’ ai.”

Example 6: 始则折桂催花.....

Translation: At first we played a game with a twig of cassia...

Clearly, “三娘” and “三太太” are two traditional terms of address unfamiliar even to Chinese readers, not to mention those in foreign countries. On the one hand, it is inadvisable that the original content is kept without any modification for they are deemed as the primary information by the author; on the other hand, full-hearted conformity with readership by discarding language form will inevitably lead to the obliteration of original flavor. In the face of this embarrassment, the translator blazes a new trail by combining transliteration and annotation together. Thus having transliterated the terms, Lin Yutang wrote in the footnote that “‘San’ means ‘number three’; ‘niang’ refers to a young married woman in a big household, while

‘t’ ait’ ai’ suggests the mistress of an independent home.” (1999:125) This explanation is short yet is to the point. In the second example, a recreation named “折桂催花” is further explained in the exegesis as a long-lasting drinking game of chance (280). While encountering barriers in comprehension, readers tend to recourse to this footnote in the first place which will help them obtain the most imperative implications. Subsequently, it is reasonable to conclude that hybridity plays a proactively role in boosting reading efficiency and inheriting Chinese culture as well.

5. Readability Requirements in the English Translation of This Book

Lin Yutang is known as a “go-between” who “sets foot on eastern and western cultures, and makes comments on articles worldwide.” (Li,2021:140) Devoting himself to carrying forward national culture, he also gives consideration to readers’ reaction in that he aspires to realize the harmonious coexistence between defamiliarization and readability. With the former discussed in the previous section, the keynote here will convert to readability to reveal Lin’s diversified translation methods.

Example 7: 芸不善饮，强之可三杯，教以射覆为令。

Translation: Yün could not drink, but could take at most three cups when compelled to. I taught her literary games in which the loser had to drink.

According to the context, “literary game” here is likely to be interpreted by readers as a form of wine-drinking paronomasia at the feast, which is exactly what the translator expects to convey. Regarded as a mysterious divination at the very beginning, “射覆” later refers to a guessing game by hiding things under bowls. Afterwards, it develops into a sophisticated drinking game with one side euphemistically pointing to an idiom or allusion by using a metaphor and the other revealing the answer. With a view to transferring the complete meaning in a comprehensible way, the translator tactfully casts away the language “shell” and only keeps its kernel, improving readability to a great extent. In this way, readers are expected to enjoy a fluent semantic flow at one breath.

Example 8: 种水仙无灵璧石.....

Translation: Once I planted some narcissus and could not find any pebbles from Lingpi for use...

In this example, Lin Yutang equals “水仙” to “narcissus”, bringing about a poignant Greek mythology: Narcissus was a handsome young man who rejected the courtship of numerous beautiful girls. Eventually, he fell in love with his own reflection in the water and pined for it so much that he turned into a flower named after “narcissus”. Likewise, there is also a Chinese fairy tale in which the flower is likened to “凌波仙子”, an embodiment of pure love and divine beauty. That’s to say, despite diverse signifiers in different languages, this flower has been cherished for its graceful image and extraordinary qualities around the globe. This translation which gives full play to readability rouses a strong sense of association among foreign readers who are capable of being empathetic with Shen Fu that has an inveterate preference for flowers.

Example 9: 我辈衣冠之家，何得负此小人之债!

Translation: We belong to a scholars’ family; how could we fail to repay a loan from such common people?

Initially, “衣冠” exclusively pointed to exquisitely decorated clothes worn by noble family members; it later became a metonymy representing wealthy and influential households. Here, Shen Fu’s father had sufficient confidence to flatter his family as “衣冠之家” in that he bought lots of real estates while serving as an eminent local “游幕”, an official position responsible for civil affairs. Actually, the author unfolds before readers’ eyes a sharp contrast between people in different social status, and for the translator’s part, Lin Yutang renders “衣冠” into “scholars”

and “小人” into “common people”, further underscoring the social hierarchical gap caused by occupation. In this sense, readers are given a chance to infer that scholars in the Qing Dynasty may enjoy a higher social status compared with people engaged in other vocations. All in all, the translator not only fulfills the demand for readability, but also illuminates some fuzzy and obscure meanings hidden between the lines.

6. Conclusion

With all of these discussed, it is clear that Lin Yutang himself, as an intermediate between the author and readers, is of tremendous significance in determining the translation output. Laying the same focus on both parties, he is proficient at making use of a wide range of translation approaches in efforts to preserve idiomatic Chinese cultural elements and meanwhile, stand together with foreign readers to take care of their reading experience. Lin’s translation is a perfect exemplification that confirms the possible coexistence of defamiliarization and readability; furthermore, there is more extensive space for their complementary cooccurrence in harmony. To quote again what Qian Zhongshu said, the translator Lin Yutang has undergone an excruciating “trek” through which he has made strenuous endeavors to strike a balance between two influential factors and ultimately, has arrived at his “destination” triumphantly.

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