

A Study on English Translation of Culture-Loaded Words in *The Republic of Wine* From the Perspective of Postcolonial Translation Theory

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Abstract

Numerous scholars assert that Mo Yan's Nobel Prize in Literature is a testament to the exceptional artistic quality of his works, as well as the pivotal role of translation in their dissemination. Despite the extensive attention and analysis that *the Republic of Wine* has garnered within the literary domain, there is a notable dearth of research dedicated specifically to its English translation. This paper, therefore, employs the theoretical framework of postcolonial translation theory to examine the English rendition of *the Republic of Wine*, with a particular focus on the translation strategies employed for culture-specific terminology. The investigation reveals that the adoption of postcolonial translation theory not only enhances the target language audience's understanding of Chinese cultural nuances but also fosters the exchange and integration of diverse cultural perspectives. Consequently, this approach contributes to the broader international recognition and appreciation of Chinese literature.

Key words: Postcolonial translation theory; Culture-loaded words; *The Republic of Wine*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Wine is a novel that presents a nuanced critique of reality, exhibiting daring endeavors and narrative innovations. The story revolves around Ding Gouer, a specialized investigator, who is assigned the task of probing into the heinous crime of infant cannibalism. However, none of those can resist its allure, and amidst the interplay of power, wine, and women, Ding Gouer, despite his resolve to abstain from alcohol, succumbs to intoxication and meets an untimely demise in a rustic latrine. As Jin Jiefu said, Mo Yan is a prolific writer and a true national treasure in Chinese culture (Wang, 2013). Mo Yan's works have been translated abroad and in 2012 won the Nobel Prize in Literature, and Mo Yan has repeatedly pointed out that translation has a significant impact on literature. If there is no translation, there is no way to talk about world literature, and he especially praised Howard Goldblatt whose translations added lustre to his original works. He is not Chinese, and he will try to retain the "Chineseness" of the original text in the translation process. Otherwise, he would become like a colonialist, which seems to be contrary to the idea of translation of "being worthy of the readers" (Li, 2012). Postcolonial translation theory continues the "cultural turn" of translation studies in the 1980s, originating in postcolonial theory, which is concerned with politically charged issues such as politics, ethnicity, race, and imperialism. And domestication, foreignization and hybridity are three translation strategies under postcolonial translation theory. In fact, domestication, foreignization, and hybridity are not in conflict with each other. A translated work should reflect the important relationship between languages that complement and interact with each other rather than pursue the equivalence between the translation and the original. Thus, this paper employs the framework of

postcolonial translation theory to investigate the English translation of *the Republic of Wine*, critically examining the translation strategies applied to culture-loaded words.

2. TRANSLATION STRATEGIES OF POSTCOLONIAL TRANSLATION THEORY

Postcolonial translation theory is indeed a significant and well-developed field in translation studies. It encompasses essential concepts such as domestication, foreignization, and hybridity. Understanding these concepts will certainly contribute to the comprehension and application of the theory.

2.1 Domestication

Venuti elucidated the theoretical origins of domestication and foreignization translation through Schleiermacher's theory, which posits two distinct approaches to translation: one that maintains fidelity to the author and another that caters to the reader (Venuti, 1995). According to Venuti, the domesticating method involves a reduction of the foreign text to align with target-language cultural values, thereby facilitating easier comprehension for target readers. Consequently, domestication advocates for translations that adapt to the cultural customs of the target language, placing emphasis on the target readers. The efficacy of domestication translation hinges upon the nature of the power dynamics at play. In the context of postcolonialism, domestication translation strategies have perpetuated the dominance of strong cultures. However, an excessive reliance on domestication translation risks erasing the linguistic and cultural attributes of the weaker culture, thereby exacerbating the power disparity between the strong and weak cultures.

2.2 Foreignization

The term "foreignization" as defined by Lawrence Venuti, has been widely employed in the field of translation. The foreignizing method entails intentionally highlighting cultural dissimilarities in the foreign text, emphasizing linguistic registers that showcase the source culture to target readers. Within the framework of postcolonial translation theory, the strategy of foreignization adopts a resistant approach, wherein translation is utilized to convey the differences between the source language and culture, enabling the weak culture to break away from the dominance of the strong culture and facilitating an equitable dialogue between the two. However, it is not advisable to fully embrace the foreignization translation strategy as an excessive amount of cultural content from the original language may distort the target language reader's interpretation of the source language culture and impede comprehension.

2.3 Hybridity

The term "hybrid" originally had a biological connotation, describing the offspring resulting from the crossbreeding of different species or genera. Over time, however, its usage expanded to encompass various disciplines. In the realm of postcolonialism, Homi Bhabha introduced the concept of hybridity. Postcolonial translation theory, in particular, examines the hybrid nature of language and cultural values manifested in translated texts. In the context of cultural exchanges, it is important to note that there exist no absolute categories of domestication and foreignization. Regardless of the chosen translation strategy, whether it is domestication or foreignization, some degree of hybridity is inevitable in the translation process. Even when employing the domestication strategy, traces of the source language's cultural characteristics persist. Similarly, in foreignization, the translator must consider the cultural nuances of the target language. Therefore, the distinction between domestication and foreignization lies primarily in the degree of hybridity they exhibit. Amidst the poles of complete domestication and complete foreignization, there exists a "third space" where translators can negotiate between the two strategies, finding a balance that accommodates both source and target cultures. This negotiation allows for the integration of hybrid elements in the translation, reflecting the complexities of cultural and linguistic exchange (Zhao, 2011).

3. TRANSLATION STRATEGIES OF CULTURE-LOADED WORDS IN *THE REPUBLIC OF WINE*

3.1 Culture-loaded Words Translation: Domestication

Translators are not always unbiased in their translation process and frequently approach their work from a particular cultural perspective. Throughout their engagement with the original text and the resulting translation, as well as the source and target language cultures, translators are inevitably affected by the cultural influences ingrained within their own "collective unconscious" and consequently employ the strategy of domestication in their translations. In an interview, Howard Goldblatt expressed his desire to preserve the cultural attributes while ensuring the fluency of the translation. And there are many examples in his translation:

Example 1:

ST: "太岁头上动土。" (Mo, 2017, p.122)

TT: "Howdare they touch a single hair on the head of the mighty Jupiter." (Howard Goldblatt, 2012, p.255)

In the provided example, the term “太岁” is a culturally rich word that signifies a divine being in ancient Chinese mythology, known for its control over both auspicious and inauspicious events, and holds a supreme position with a far-reaching impact. It is a unique religious term within the Chinese cultural context. This connotative example is intended to communicate the idea that “太岁” is a deity of high status and considerable influence. The intended audience, lacking a corresponding cultural background, may find it difficult to grasp the full significance of this term. In the English context, “Jupiter” represents the chief deity in the Roman state religion, wielding considerable power. The influence and status attributed to “Jupiter” can be seen as comparable to that of “太岁”. By employing a strategy of domestication, Goldblatt facilitates a cultural transformation, creating a bridge between the two distinct cultural domains and expressing his subjective agency throughout the translation process.

This approach not only preserves the cultural nuances of the original term but also makes it more accessible to the target audience, allowing them to appreciate and understand the cultural and religious aspects of the source text. By drawing a parallel between “太岁” and “Jupiter”, Goldblatt successfully conveys the essence of the Chinese deity while also providing a familiar context for the target readers to engage with the cultural and literary aspects of the original work.

Example 2:

ST: 老师不必怜香惜玉进退维谷, 更不必投鼠忌器左顾右盼, 有什么看法只说不要吞吞吐吐, 竹筒倒豆子, 是我党的光荣传统之一。(Mo, 2017, p.59)

TT: So please, don't feel you need to pussy-foot around it. Just say what's on your mind and don't beat around the bush. Laying all your cards on the table is one of our party's great traditions. (Howard Goldblatt, 2012, p.125)

Within this case, Goldblatt adeptly undertook the task of transforming a sequence of four-character phrases through the application of domestication. In his rendition, he rendered the four-character phrases “怜香惜玉、进退维谷、投鼠忌器、左顾右盼” as “pussy-foot around it”. By providing a literal translation of these phrases as “have a tender heart for the fair sex, be in a cleft stick, hesitate to pelt a rat for fear of smashing the vase beside it, and glance right and left,” the resulting sentence lacks logical coherence and fails to convey a clear semantic meaning in relation to the original sentence. Consequently, the intended message of the original text may elude the target readers. Therefore, Goldblatt opted for domestication, leveraging his comprehension of the cultural backgrounds in both the source text context and the target text context. Additionally, the idiomatic meaning of “竹筒倒豆子” resonates with the act of expressing oneself candidly. Goldblatt selects the English idiom “lay all one's cards on the table” which denotes honestly revealing one's

thoughts or intentions. Notably, both the Chinese idiom and the English idiom share a similar connotation. By virtue of Goldblatt's deliberate adaptation and judicious selection of translation strategies and methods attuned to the cultural backgrounds of the source and target texts, the original work's ideas are effectively conveyed, rendering them more readily understandable for the target readers.

3.2 Culture-loaded Words Translation: Foreignization

The postcolonial translation theory highlights the importance of considering the readers of the original language during the translation process, in order to evoke similar sentiments among the readers of the translated language. And we should represent Chinese cultural attributes when dealing with words or expressions unique to the Chinese context. Howard Goldblatt also seeks to convey the essence of “heterogeneity” in his translation, aiming to reflect the diverse nature of the source text. This approach is evident in his translation of the Republic of Wine, where he consistently employs the strategy of foreignization to accentuate the element of “heterogeneity”.

Example 3:

ST: 尤其反复看了信的空白处那位熟悉他的首长龙飞凤舞的批示。(Mo, 2017, p.15)

TT:focusing on the marginal notations in the florid script of a senior official who knew him well. (Howard Goldblatt, 2012, p.34)

In the given scenario, Ding Gouer was entrusted by the governor to investigate the alleged neonatal consumption in Jiuguo City. The Chinese phrase “首长龙飞凤舞的批示” is employed metaphorically, symbolizing the head official's distinctive and artistic handwriting. This metaphor not only highlights the chief's eccentric writing style but also provides insights into their personal disposition and authority. Goldblatt, in his translation, deciphered the semantic meaning of the phrase and employed foreignization techniques to effectively communicate it to the intended audience. Although the metaphorical imagery of “dragon” and “phoenix” in the Chinese text remains untranslated, the chief's handwriting style is aptly elucidated using the adjective “florid”. This approach allows for a partial preservation of the artistic qualities inherent in the source language, while also depicting the cultural disparities between the two languages.

By adapting and selecting appropriate expressions during translation, Goldblatt ensures that the target readers face no obstacles in comprehending the source text. The use of “florid” as a substitute for the metaphorical imagery effectively captures the essence of the chief's handwriting style, enabling the target audience to appreciate the cultural and literary aspects of the original work. This translation strategy makes it more accessible to the target

audience, allowing them to engage with the cultural and artistic qualities of the source text.

Example 4:

ST:你就是奔来两匹纸糊的叫驴, 我也得买下来烧给灶神爷。(Mo, 2017, p.351)

TT: ...even if you brought me a pair of donkeys made of cardboard, I'd buy them and burn them in offering to the Kitchen God. (Howard Goldblatt, 2012, p.744)

In this illuminating example, the Chinese term “灶神爷” refers to the highest-ranking official in the celestial bureaucracy, known as the Jade Emperor of Heaven. This divine figure's domain encompasses the supervision of domestic hearths within the realm of Chinese folklore. However, within the framework of Western religious traditions, there is a notable absence of comparable beliefs, rendering this cultural concept largely unfamiliar to Western audiences. Recognizing the need for cultural adaptation, the translator, Goldblatt, skillfully employed the strategy of foreignization to render “灶神爷” as “the Kitchen God” in the target language. This choice not only preserves the cultural integrity of the original term but also facilitates understanding among readers who may not be versed in Chinese folklore. By capturing the essence of the source language, Goldblatt's translation allows target readers to infer the intended meaning within the context that he has meticulously constructed.

Ultimately, the translator's adept handling of cultural nuances and the execution of a suitable cultural transformation serve to highlight the “heterogeneity” inherent in the translation process. This approach not only bridges the cultural divide but also enriches the target language with new concepts and imagery, fostering a deeper appreciation of the source culture among the target audience.

3.3 Culture-loaded Words Translation: Hybridity

The hybridity translation strategy is a key element of postcolonial translation theory. Homi Bhabha proposed the concept of a “third space,” an intermediary realm between the source and target cultures where negotiation and translation occur. This “third space,” or hybridity, is a blend of colonial and colonized cultures (Bhabha, 1994). Bhabha's strategy advocates for the deconstruction of colonial culture and the empowerment of the colonized, contributing to decolonization efforts. Traditional translation strategies like domestication or foreignization may fall short when dealing with culture-specific terms. Thus, the hybridity approach offers a fresh perspective for translating such terms, ensuring cultural nuances are preserved.

Example 5:

ST: 丁钩儿感叹万分, 方知自己是井底之蛙, 知识贫乏。(Mo, 2017, p.135)

TT: Ding Gou'er realized how impoverished his

knowledge was, like the proverbial frog at the bottom of a well. (Howard Goldblatt, 2012: 285)

In this instance, the phrase “井底之蛙” comprises four Chinese characters. These four-character expressions possess a concise and refined structure, making them commonly utilized in Chinese communication. The literal meaning of “井底之蛙” is that the frog residing at the bottom of a well can only perceive a portion of the sky equal to the size of the well opening. The figurative meaning of “井底之蛙” implies individuals with limited knowledge and a myopic perspective on the future. In the given example, the translator skillfully employs this phrase as a metaphor to convey its deeper, connotative meaning. However, due to the cultural differences between China and the West, understanding the connotations of this phrase may be challenging for readers who are not familiar with Chinese culture. Recognizing this, Goldblatt, leveraging his expertise in Chinese, translates “井底之蛙” into “the proverbial frog at the bottom of a well” in English. The term “proverbial” is used to indicate that the phrase is a well-known saying or a part of a popular proverb.

By employing a strategy of hybridity, this translation effectively communicates the cultural nuances of the original phrase while also providing a more accessible context for the target audience to appreciate and understand the artistic qualities of the source text. This approach not only preserves the essence of the Chinese expression but also facilitates a deeper engagement with the cultural and literary aspects of the original work for readers in the target language.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the English translation of the Republic of Wine is explored through the lens of postcolonial theory, focusing on culture-loaded words and their treatment in the translation process. The analysis considers the strategies of domestication, foreignization, and hybridity. The main findings reveal that Howard Goldblatt primarily employs foreignization as a strategy to preserve the local Chinese culture, supplemented by domestication and hybridity to aid target readers in understanding Chinese culture more easily. This approach ensures that the translated version retains the cultural connotations and values present in the original work. Furthermore, the study emphasizes that examining the translation of culture-loaded words in the Republic of Wine through the postcolonial translation theory not only reproduces their cultural significance but also holds significant value in promoting Chinese culture globally. Consequently, colloquialisms and culturally distinctive elements within the source text are deliberately retained, as a means of showcasing the inherent attributes of Chinese literature and culture to Western readers. By considering the cognitive understanding and emotional

response of readers, Howard Goldblatt not only seeks to promote the dissemination of Chinese culture but also strives, to a certain extent, to counteract the cultural hegemony associated with cultural imperialism. Remarkably, his translations exhibit a remarkable absence of conflict, imbalance, and disharmony arising from the juxtaposition of English and Chinese. Hence, Howard Goldblatt's translations have achieved a semblance of cultural diffusion, contributing to the anti-colonial cause while presenting a more faithful portrayal of traditional Chinese life and literature.

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