



Idiom Translation of *Love in a Fallen City* From the Perspective of Hermeneutics

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Abstract

Love in a Fallen City is Eileen Chang’s classic novel, which contains many idioms. Guided by the theory of hermeneutics, this paper explores the idiom translation in this novel from the following four steps: trust, aggression, incorporation and compensation. By this study, it can be found that the translator, Karen S. Kingsbury, has used various translation methods, such as literal translation, free translation, omission, interpretation, borrowing the western expressions, etc. By studying their translation methods, this study hopes to provide reference for the idiom translation in other novels in future and promote the cross culture communication between China and the west.

Key words: Idiom translation; Pre-understanding; Fourfold hermeneutic motion

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INTRODUCTION

Love in a Fallen City is a famous short story in 1940s, which described the love story between the hero, Fan Liuyuan and the heroine, Bai Liusu. Its English version

was translated by American scholar, Karen S. Kingsbury, and was published in 2007. After its publication, Chinese scholars have studied its English version from many aspects. Their main research content includes translator’s subjectivity, translation style, culture-loaded terms and so on. The main theories involved are eco-translatology, inter-subjectivity, reception aesthetics, etc. Based on the above researches, this paper will try to study the idiom translation of this novel from the perspective of hermeneutics. It applies hermeneutics into idiom translation, hoping to provide reference for hermeneutic theory application and idiom translation.

1. THEORETICAL BASIS

Hermeneutic theory originated from the philosophical field at first. Its main representatives include Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer and so on. Some concepts in hermeneutic theory lays a good foundation for the proposal of George Steiner’s fourfold motion theory.

Heidegger proposed the concept of “pre-understanding”, which is similar to the cognitive structure discussed in cognitive linguistics (Liu Junping, 2009: 215). Heidegger explained the differences of understanding are due to the different “pre-understandings” possessed by interpreters. Different interpreters will have various knowledge structures, educational levels and life experiences. All of these factors can influence the interpreter’s pre-understandings. During translation, as the interpreters, translators with different pre-understandings will produce different translations. Besides, Chinese and target language readers may also have different pre-understandings, so the translator should pay attention to their differences.

What’s more, the concept of “fusion of horizons” also makes an effect on Steiner’s fourfold motion theory. Understanding is to achieve “fusion of horizons” between the source text and the interpreter. Influenced by this concept, Steiner proposed “understanding as translation”

(George Steiner, 2001:1). Therefore, Steiner believed that translation is also to achieve the “fusion of horizons” between the translator and the source text.

Influenced by hermeneutic theory, George Steiner published the book *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* in 1975, and claimed his translation theory in this book. Steiner expounded the translation process from the following four steps.

According to Steiner, the translator should invest his or her trust at the beginning of translation, which is regarded as the first step. It is an adventurous attempt for the translator to invest trust. Once the translator invests the trust, the translation activity starts.

After investing trust, the translator begins to attack the source text based on his or her pre-understanding. The process of aggression is to understand the source text and extract its meaning. However, this step is inevitably invasive. Owing to some reasons, the translator will invade the source text more or less.

After obtaining the meaning from the source text, translators will adopt different translation methods to express the semantic or cultural connotations of the source text for target readers during this step, i.e. the incorporation stage.

Experiencing the above three steps, the translation may cause some semantic and cultural factors lost. Considering that, Steiner thought the last step should be compensation, which means that the translation should make up the source text. Therefore, the translator will adopt different compensation methods to compensate the source text.

The above four steps proposed by Steiner clarified the whole translation process clearly, which has guiding significance for translation process study and translation practice study.

2. THE APPLICATION OF HERMENEUTICS IN IDIOMS TRANSLATION IN THE SOURCE TEXT

In the source text, Eileen Chang used many idioms, which is a difficult point during translation. The idiom translation is directly related to the understanding and reception of target language readers, so importance should be attached to it. This part will analyze the idiom translation process from the four stages of trust, aggression, incorporation and compensation.

2.1 Trust

2.1.1 Trust of Eileen Chang and Her Work

Eileen Chang is an influential writer in the last century in China, whose works mainly involve novel, prose, script and so on. Apart from these works, she also translated some works, such as *The Old Man and the Sea*. Eileen Chang has created many excellent works during her whole life. Her works are deeply loved by Chinese readers and

many of them have been adapted into stage plays, movies and television works.

The source text is Eileen Chang’s representative work, which has been read by a large number of Chinese readers. It is a very influential work and enjoys a high reputation in China.

Based on the above two points, it can be concluded that Eileen Chang’s attainments in literary field and the great influence of this source text are important premises for Karen S. Kingsbury to invest trust and regard it as her translation object.

2.1.2 Trust of the Translator-Karen S. Kingsbury

“Karen S. Kingsbury is a famous sinologist and an expert in studying Eileen Chang in America. She has intense interest in Chinese literature and culture” (Liu Hong, Yu Xuan, Zhang Kaicun, 2013: 132), so she has a sufficient understanding about Chinese culture and Eileen Chang’s novels. Apart from *Love in a Fallen City*, she also translated and published the book of *Half a Lifelong Romance* written by Eileen Chang. In addition, Karen S. Kingsbury’s native language is English, so her translation will be more suitable for the pre-understandings of English readers.

What’s more, both Eileen Chang and Karen S. Kingsbury are females, so the translator may be easy to have an emotional resonance with the author. The translator can grasp the emotional characteristics of the source text and transfer it to English readers accurately.

To sum up, whether from the perspective of knowledge, linguistic competence or emotion, the translator is qualified to complete this translation task. Therefore, the English version translated by Karen S. Kingsbury deserves trust.

2.1.3 Trust of the Idioms in *Love in a Fallen City*

“Generally speaking, Chinese idioms involve set phrases, colloquialisms, two-part allegorical sayings, proverbs, allusions, etc.” (Wang Shirong, 2015: 71). In the source text, Eileen Chang used many idioms. These idioms play an important role in characterization and plot development, and their using makes the source text closer to life.

Chinese idioms contain a lot of cultural connotations and they reflect the intelligence of Chinese, so the translator trusts and affirms their value in the source text. During the translation process, the translator’s accurate translation of idioms is conducive to transfer the content of the source text.

2.2 Aggression

Aggression is to invade the source text based on the translator’s own understanding. During idiom translation, the translator has invaded the cultural images and numbers in the idioms of *Love in a Fallen City*.

2.2.1 Aggression to the Cultural Images in Idioms

SL: 鬼使神差

TL: The gods must be behind this.

“The concepts of the ghost and deity can date back to the ancient China, which have become one of the ideological elements in Chinese spiritual life” (Lu Lin, 2011: 97). However, there are differences about the concepts of the ghost and deity between China and the west.

In China, the concepts of the ghost and deity mainly originate from Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism or mythology. For example, in *Journey to the West*, the classical novel in ancient China, there are many images of ghosts and deities. In the heaven, there are various gods, such as the Jade Emperor. And in the hell, there are all kinds of ghosts.

In the west, the concepts of ghosts and deities are mainly related to the western culture. For example, the vampire image described in *The Vampire Diaries*, which is familiar to the western people. Besides, their concepts of deities are mainly from the *Bible* and the ancient Greek mythology, such as the god in the *Bible* and the Goddess Athena in Greek mythology.

Therefore, when translating, the translator invaded the source text and used the image of “god” in west to replace the images of the “ghost” and “deity” in Chinese. By translator’s aggression, target language readers can understand and accept Chinese meaning easily. Then they can involve themselves to the plot of this novel better.

2.2.2 Aggression to the Number in Idioms

SL	TL
众人越是说得凿凿有据，流苏越是百喙莫辩。	The more that people had to talk about, the less she’d be able to defend herself.
天字第一号	huge import

Eileen Chang also used some idioms related to numbers in *Love in the Fallen City*. Due to culture differences, there may be different cultural connotations for the same number between China and the west. Therefore, the translator should consider whether to retain the number or not during translation.

Taking the Chinese expression “百喙莫辩” as an example, its literal meaning is that someone can not absolve himself even if he has one hundred mouths. Actually, “one hundred” is a rhetoric device of hyperbole, which means “a lot of”. In order to make sure that target language readers have a clear understanding, the translator invaded the source text and omitted the number in this expression during translation. Similarly, when translating the folk adage of “天字第一号”, the translator also attacked its number and only extracted its connotative meaning.

During the process of idiom translation, the translator invaded the cultural images or numbers in idioms based on her understanding, i.e. on the basis of fusion of horizons. The aggression launched by the translator made the idioms’ literal meanings lost, but it is conducive for English readers to comprehend and accept.

2.3 Incorporation

After bringing back the meaning of the Chinese idioms, the translator will try to transfer their meaning to target language readers. Then it comes into the third step of hermeneutic motion—incorporation. In this stage, the translator has adopted different translation methods to translate the Chinese idioms of *Love in a Fallen City*.

2.3.1 Literal Translation

SL: 添个人不过添双筷子

TL: One more person, two more chopsticks, that’s all.

This is a common expression in Chinese, which is a polite expression especially used to invite someone to have a meal. It means that it doesn’t matter if there is one more person for the meal. In the source text, this folk adage is said by Third Master to Bai Liusu. He pointed out that it is no problem for the Bai House to provide meals for Bai Liusu in the past, but now the expense can not be neglected because of rising prices.

Based on the context in the source text, the translator chose the literal translation method during the incorporation stage. As for this folk adage, China and the west do not have the same pre-understanding, but this kind of incorporation method adopted by Karen S. Kingsbury will not hinder target language readers’ understanding. The words said by Third Master in the source text have provided a hint for English readers to comprehend the original meaning of this Chinese expression.

By the literal translation method adopted in the incorporation stage, the English readers can find more reading interest by inferring the Chinese expression’s meaning according to the context. Besides, this kind of incorporation method can promote target language readers to absorb more about Chinese expressions, which is conducive to spread Chinese culture.

2.3.2 Free Translation

ST: 打退堂鼓

TL: giving up halfway

“打退堂鼓” is a Chinese set phrase from *The Injustice to Dou E* written by Guan Hanqing, who is a famous dramatist in ancient China. In ancient times, after the official judged the case, the servants will beat the drums to indicate that the official will leave. However, this meaning is not often used by common people now. At present, its meaning has been developed. In the source text, it means that someone backs out halfway.

Considering the culture background and development of the word meaning about this set phrase, the translator only extracted its commonly used meaning in the aggression stage. Based on this kind of aggression mode, the translator chose the incorporation method of free translation.

During translation, the translator should take the responsibility to make sure that the English readers can comprehend the source text by his or her translation. This kind of absorption method transferred the connotative

meaning of this Chinese set phrase to target language readers directly, which makes its literal meaning lost during translation. However, it can help English readers have a better understanding about the source text.

2.3.3 Omission

SL: 大张旗鼓的排场一下

TL: throw a **big** bash

“大张旗鼓” is a Chinese set phrase. Its literal meaning refers to holding up the banners and beating the drums in attacking the enemies during the war. Now, it often refers to someone does something in a large scale. In the source text, it means that Fan Liuyuan promised to hold up a huge wedding party to entertain relatives.

In the incorporation stage, the translator adopted the omission translation method and attacked the literal meaning of this Chinese set phrase by omitting the images of “banner” and “drum”. However, the word “big” used by translator has transferred the core meaning of this Chinese set phrase to target language readers clearly.

This incorporation method of omission translation makes the literal meaning of this Chinese set phrase lost, but it has transferred the connotative meaning of this Chinese idiom briefly and concisely. It can avoid the misunderstanding caused by literal translation and make the source text easily-understood. Besides, by this kind of incorporation method, target language readers can have a more fluent reading experience and involve themselves to plot of the source text better.

Through the analysis of idiom translation in the above three examples, it can be found that the translator adopted different incorporation methods during translation. To sum up, in the incorporation stage, the translator should adopt various kinds of translation methods to achieve the translation purpose.

2.4 Compensation

Because of the above three steps of trust, aggression and incorporation, the balance between the original text and translation version will be lost, so the translator’s compensation for the source text during the translation process is very necessary. Through the compensation made by translator, the original text and translation version can achieve balance again.

2.4.1 Interpretation

SL: 偷鸡不成蚀把米

TL: Trying to steal a chicken with a handful of grain, and losing both bird and bait.

This is a Chinese folk adage, which means that someone wanted to steal a chicken with the grain as bait, but he failed and lost the grain at the same time. This is an expression peculiar to China, so it is not known by target language readers. If the translator chooses to translate it according to its literal meaning, such as “failed to steal the chicken and lost a handful of grain”. It may confuse English readers why the person failed to steal a chicken at the loss of a handful of grain.

Based on the above considerations, the translator chose to interpret its meaning by adding some other information. She elaborated the original meaning of this Chinese folk adage and pointed out that the person “losing both bird and bait”. The word “bait” is an important supplement to the information of the Chinese folk adage. It will make target language understand this folk adage without confusion. Besides, the words “both”, “bird” and “bait” all begin with the letter “b”, which creates a beauty of rhyme.

2.4.2 Borrowing Western Expressions

Idiom are the epitomes of culture, which reflect the language habits and culture characteristics of different nations. As for some idioms, their connotative meanings are known by both China and the west. They appeared variously on superficial meanings, but both sides have the similar expressions. This is based the common pre-understandings of human beings. Therefore, as for the translation of some idioms, the translator adopted to borrow the western expressions directly.

SL: 家丑不可外扬

TL: Dirty laundry shouldn’t be aired in public.

This is a Chinese set phrase, which emphasizes that do not publicize the disgraceful things of the family. In the source text, the author used this idiom to illustrate that the Bai family is not willing to let more people know the ambiguous relations between Bai Liusu and Fan Liuyuan.

This translation by Karen S. Kingsbury is from the western idiom—wash one’s dirty linen in public, which refers to publicize something disgraceful of someone. Therefore, the translator borrowed the western idiom to express the same meaning. The translator slightly changed the meaning of western idiom to adapt to the Chinese meaning.

As for target language readers, they are more familiar to their native culture. Once they read this translation, they will associate the existed idiom in the west and understand the connotative meaning of this Chinese set phrase immediately.

From the above examples, it can be seen that both China and the west have their own expressions respectively for the same idiom. As for this phenomenon, the translator should borrow the expressions in west directly, which can compensate target language reader’s lack of culture and provide them a fluent reading experience.

The above has introduced two kinds of compensation methods about idiom translation in the source text. By the translator’s compensation, target language readers can have an accurate and profound understanding of the source text.

CONCLUSION

The last part has taken the idioms in *Love in a Fallen City* as the corpus to explore their translation process. It can be

concluded that various translation methods are involved in Karen S. Kingsbury's translation, including literal translation, free translation, omission, interpretation and borrowing western expressions. Due to the culture differences between China and the west, Chinese and target language readers may have the same or different pre-understandings. Therefore, the translator should consider the pre-understandings of Chinese and English readers, and choose the appropriate translation methods for Chinese idioms during the translation process, so as to achieve the effective communication and spread Chinese culture.

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