

The Case Study of the Translation of Chinese Classics Based on the Differences Between Chinese and English—Taking the English Version of *The Peach Blossom Land* as Example

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The classics, as their name suggests, are important ancient documents that collect the wisdom of the Chinese people and serve as a crucial way to introduce Chinese culture to the globe. Therefore, a correct translation of the Chinese classics is of great significance. In translation, translators should be aware of the differences between English and Chinese. Differences in Chinese and Western thinking indirectly lead to differences in language. Our translators, as native Chinese speakers, should be aware of the differences in the expression habits of the two languages. In this paper, the English translations of *The Peach Blossom Land* by James Robert Hightower and Lin Yutang are compared based on the differences between the two languages, and some hints and insights from the translation of the classic are summarized.

Keywords: *The Peach Blossom Land*, the differences between Chinese and English, translation of Chinese classics

Opinions About Translating Chinese Classics Into English

In the five thousand years of China's history, countless literati have left behind a wealth of outstanding works. From the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics* to poems and songs, all have contributed to the flourishing of Chinese culture and enriched the spiritual world of the people. With the implementation of globalization, it is especially important to translate the beautiful Chinese classics into foreign languages and spread our unique culture to every corner of the world. With China's rising status in the world, translating excellent Chinese works into English has become an important part of cultural communication and exchange. For a nation, language is not only a component of its culture, but also a symbol of its identity. Thus, it is more than necessary to translate Chinese classics into English.

First of all, translating Chinese classics into English is a major channel for China's excellent culture to "go globally", building a Chinese discourse system and enhancing the "soft power" of Chinese culture. If we seek continuous development, we should not only promote our culture to the world, but also get people interested in it and give them opportunities to appreciate it, thus expanding cultural influence. Nowadays, soft power is certainly not to be underestimated for building national strength. Culture is the essence of our nation, which includes people, idea of race, values, customs, habits, languages, and artifacts. Culture exists in the course of

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history and evolves with it (Cao, 2004). We need to develop and promote our culture on the basis of economic development. The national spirit, religious culture, and customs conveyed by ancient Chinese classics are among the most effective media containing Chinese culture and powerful means to educate the people and infect the world.

Second, Chinese culture is one of the important components of the multi-cultural system. In a modern society where hundreds of cultures thrive, it is necessary for China to promote its own. It not only builds a great image of our nation, but also provides a splendid opportunity for the world to learn about China. Translating the classics into English and introducing them to the world will not only help China, which embraces more than 5,000 years of history, spread its cultural vitality and values to the world, but also help Chinese culture stand out in this era. Only by spreading a culture of excellence can we earn global recognition and respect. Therefore, it is very important to properly translate the essence of the Chinese classics.

The Peach Blossom Land is a famous work written by Tao Yuanming, a poet of the Eastern Jin Dynasty. It depicts a happy, self-sufficient, class-free, under-exploited society that has become the Utopia for future generations. The work is full of Tao's social ideals and criticism of the society. *The Peach Blossom Land* has been widely translated. Appreciation and analysis of good translations can help translators master skills of translating classics and learn more about translation methods.

The Differences Between Chinese and English

The study of classical translations based on contrast is not only conducive to a better grasp of the language, but it can also further the study of translation and improve the ability of the translator. There are many differences between Chinese and English in terms of syntax, semantics, etc. It is easy to make mistakes and mislead the reader if the translator is not clear about the differences. Therefore, a correct understanding of the differences between the two languages has important implications for classical translation.

Differences Between the Chinese and Western Thinking Patterns

The thinking patterns vary from nation to nation, owing to differences in natural and social circumstances (Yu, 2003). Eastern Chinese civilization, an agricultural one, originated in the middle and lower Yellow River region. In a semi-closed geographical environment, where industry and trade could not flourish, people could rely on a small-scale farming economy for self-sufficiency. Over time, a relatively conservative view took hold. In ancient China, the harvest of crops and the survival and development of the people depended largely on nature, so that man and nature shared a very close bond. Thus, the idea of "unity of nature and man" gradually took shape. People choose to be subservient to nature and value the collective over the individual, which is modern collectivism. Chinese people are most influenced by the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, which contribute to the spiral thought pattern of Chinese. Ancient Chinese sages used to think in a holistic and dialectical way, and were good at thinking in macroscopic rather than analytical or deductive terms. The Chinese are generally reserved and the language is relatively euphemistic. They always lay the groundwork before expressing their views to avoid being abrupt. In language, this feature can be reflected in the critical information that is always placed second.

The Aegean Sea in ancient Greece was the cradle of Western civilization. With its temperate maritime climate and numerous peninsulas and ports, it offers a favorable geographical environment for commerce to flourish. As the maritime trade developed, there was a gradual interest in knowledge of navigation, astronomy,

geography, etc. It encouraged Westerners to keep exploring, to initiate one ideological revolution after another, and to advance the development of society. They have tried to explore and learn about nature with the goal of conquering it. They accumulated knowledge and pursued truth, analyzing and solving problems in the process, which led to the development of science. As a result, Western culture took on a reality-conscious look, with an emphasis on objectivity and experimentalism.

Differences in thinking patterns further lead to differences in language. Chinese and English belong to different language families, and there are great differences in their production processes and environmental backgrounds, so they share a lot of differences in expression. Language is an important form of thought and can therefore reflect many differences in thought (Yang, 2020).

The Difference in the Meaning of Words

The difference in the meaning of words means that the Chinese and English languages are not exactly one-to-one correspondences. Cultural context may give a word another color, an extended meaning, and thus give it a strong regional character and custom. For example, “shy fish” can be translated into Chinese as “害羞的鱼”, while this phrase means “shy person” in English. Moreover, in addition to “熊”, the animal, “bear” also refers to “a reckless person”.

The Difference in the Sentence Order

In English, the main information is often expressed through the main body of the sentence, while the secondary one through the subordinate clause or modification component. As a result, the emphasis of a sentence is often placed first, the semantic expression is direct and straightforward, and the sentence pattern is relatively simple. There are many passive sentences in English, which is also related to the use of conjunctions and linking sentence patterns. In Chinese, however, things are not the same. The Chinese language is topic-prominent, where the main topic is not necessarily the subject of the sentence (Luo, 2011). Important information is put behind, and the expression is relatively euphemistic and implicit. The use of various rhetorical devices, such as flashbacks, is often seen in Chinese, which makes the whole piece beautiful and the feelings revealed more delicate and rich. Also, the Chinese place more importance on the sequence of events, so the sentence order is relatively simple.

The Difference in the Syntax

At the syntactic level, Chinese emphasizes parataxis, while English emphasizes hypotaxis. Influenced by the “unity of nature and man” since ancient times, Chinese people pursue harmony and unity in thought. So, naturally, they also emphasize the harmony of meaning in language. The Chinese advocate that thinking acts directly on language, and thus more attention is paid to parataxis in language. In Chinese, things are clearly explained by combinations of multiple verbs, or by the form of running sentences, according to the sequence of time and the mode of reasoning. Context is composed primarily by the meaning of words and sentences, not by grammatical pile-up. The form and structure of sentences are varied, which reflects the diversity and flexibility of Chinese sentences.

However, Westerners believe that thinking cannot directly act on language, and there must be an “intermediary” between them. As a result, they pay more attention to logical forms in their language, making frequent use of syntax, subordinate clauses, and conjunctions. In English sentences, the subject-predicate structure is always the main body, with the predicate verb as the core. Components, such as participles, prepositions, conjunctions, and relative words make sentences more complete and coherent. Thus, the structure of English sentences always seems to extend outward from the center. In English, we can see that Westerners are

used to adding linguistic concepts to sentences, so that they seem more logical but also more abstract. The method of abstract diction in English is mainly based on the extensive use of abstract nouns and prepositions (Wang & Liu, 2001).

In short, English is more straightforward in expressing grammatical meaning and logical relations, while Chinese is more obscure.

Comparison of Excerpts From English Translations

Example 1: 桃花源记

Hightower: The Peach Blossom Spring

Lin: The Peach Colony

About the translation of the title, Hightower translated “源” into “spring”, which is the literal meaning of “源”. He did not mine the deep meaning of the title. However, in the article “桃花源” is the name of a place that is like a paradise and far away from the noise of the secular world. In Lin’s translation, “colony” means “inhabitants remain nationals of their home state but are not literally under the home state’s system of government”. This also reflects the difference between Chinese and Western thinking patterns. Hightower tends to understand “桃花源” as the place name, while Lin pays more attention to the actual function of the place.

Example 2: 晋太元中，武陵人捕鱼为业，缘溪行，忘路之远近。

Hightower: During the Tai-yuan period of the China dynasty, a fisherman of Wu-ling once rowed upstream, unmindful of the distance he had gone...

Lin: During the reign of Taiyuan of Chin, there was a fisherman of Wuling. One day he was walking along a bank. After having gone a certain distance...

Lin translated the sentence into several short sentences, and adopted “There was, was walking”. We learn later that the fisherman was rowing a boat, not walking. Hightower translated “缘溪行” into “rowed upstream”, which is correct but also vivid. Other verbs are presented in adverbial form, which retains the English character of multiple compound sentences.

Example 3: 夹岸数百步

Hightower: For several hundred paces on both banks of the stream...

Lin: ...which extended along the bank for about a hundred yards.

“夹岸” means “on both banks of the stream”. Hightower translated it as “on both banks of the stream”, which exactly explains the original meaning. Lin translated “数百步” into “a hundred yards”. “Yard” means “a unit of length equal to 3 feet; a unit of length is equal to 3 feet; defined as 91.44 cm; originally taken to be the average length of a stride”. In ancient China, people used “bu” (步, unit of length) as a unit to measure length. The standard of “bu” varies from dynasties. One “bu” equals “eight chi” (尺, unit of length) in the Zhou Dynasty, six in the Qin Dynasty, and then was set as five chi later. Moreover, the concept of “chi” is also different among periods. One chi is about 24.2 cm in the Three Kingdoms period and 25.8 cm in the Southern Dynasties period. Tao Yuanming lived in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, with one “bu” of about 1.25 m. It appears that Lin employed domestication in the translation, which is convenient for foreign readers to understand. However, if the “步” is directly translated into “yard”, there will differ from reality due to the different unit length.

Example 4: 中无杂树，芳草鲜美，落英缤纷。渔人甚异之。

Hightower: There was no other kind of tree. The wild flowers growing under them were fresh and lovely, and fallen petals covered the ground—It made a great impression on the fisher-man.

Lin: He noticed with surprise that the grove had a magic effect, so singularly free from the usual mingling of brushwood, while the beautifully grassy ground was covered with its rose petals.

“芳草” refers to “fragrant herb”, and forms a counterpoint with “落英”. In ancient Chinese poetry, we can find many fragrant herbs, such as angelica dahurica (白芷), and that is because they are symbols of beauty and purity in Chinese culture. And the fragrant herb here also corresponds to the beautiful artistic conception of the Peach Blossom Land. Therefore, Hightower’s translation of “芳草” as “the wild flowers growing under...” is not correct enough. It can be seen that the wide meaning of Chinese words leads to misunderstandings. Lin simplified “渔人甚异之” to “he noticed with surprise that...”, making the translation more concise in language, more compact in structure, and conforming to the logical character of English.

Example 5: 复前行，欲穷其林。

Hightower: He went on for away with the idea of finding out how far the grove extended.

Lin: He went further to explore, and when he came to the end of the grove.

“复前行” means “to keep rowing”. Hightower translated it into “with the idea of finding out”, reflecting the difference that Chinese is “dynamic” while English is “static”. In Lin’s translation, “went further” indicates that the fisherman went on by his boat. Though “与穷其林” was omitted, we can learn it from “when he came to the end of the grove”, which is very succinct and concise.

Example 6: 复行数十步，豁然开朗。土地平旷，屋舍俨然，有良田、美池、桑竹之属。阡陌交通，鸡犬相闻。

Hightower: After a few dozen steps it suddenly opened out onto a broad and level plain where well-built houses were surrounded by rich fields and pretty ponds. Mulberry, bamboo and other trees and plants grew there, and criss-cross paths skirted the fields. The sounds of cocks crowing and dogs barking could be heard from one courtyard to the next.

Lin: After a dozen steps, it opened into a flood of light. He saw before his eyes a wide, level valley, with houses and fields and farms. There were bamboos and mulberries; farmers were working and dogs and chickens were running about.

By comparing the two translations, it can be seen that in Hightower’s translation long sentences and clauses are frequently used, while in Lin’s short sentences are closer to the characteristics of Chinese. Hightower, as a native English speaker, is more dominant in English expressions. This leads us to wonder whether, in translating a classic book into English, we should focus on preserving the linguistic features of the original text or cater to the reading habits of the target audience. “鸡犬相闻” comes from *Tao Te Ching*, which refers to a dense population. Hightower literally translates it as “The sounds of cocks crowing and dogs barking could be heard from one courtyard to the next”. In contrast, Lin’s “dogs and chickens were running about” is more concise, but also reflects the bustling landscape of the place.

Example 7: 黄发垂髫，并怡然自乐。

Hightower: Old men and boys were carefree and happy.

Lin: The old men and children appeared very happy and contented.

In ancient China, “垂髫” referred to girls aged between three and seven or eight-year-old boys. However, Hightower only translated it as “boys”. This suggests that Hightower is narrowing the meaning of the term and does not have a full understanding of it.

Example 8: 此人一一为具言所闻，皆叹惋。

Hightower: They sighed unhappily as the fisherman enumerated the dynasties one by one and recounted the vicissitudes of each.

Lin: The fisherman told them, which they heard with great amazement.

Hightower used “as”, which reflects the English feature of frequent occurrence of conjunctions. His translation adopted the compound long sentence in the pattern. And in expression order, “sighed unhappily” was translated first, which accords with the English expression habit of giving priority to the key information. Lin uses non-restrictive attributive clauses and translates the sentence in time order, which abides by the step-by-step language order of Chinese. And he uses short sentences in structure and concise expressions in language. Comparatively, Hightower’s translation is closer to the habit of English expression.

Conclusions

The Peach Blossom Land holds a high place in Chinese classical literature. Tao imbues the terse, vivid writing with profound meaning, which makes the work enduring.

Chinese classics are a treasure of the world’s culture. Through English translations of Chinese classics, the world can learn more about China. In the translation of *The Peach Blossom Land*, Mr. Lin Yutang has annotated the historical characters and dynasties to facilitate the target readers to understand Chinese culture. It can be seen that Mr. Lin has made so many efforts to promote Chinese culture, which is something we need to learn as translators. As the Chinese government advocates “the Belt and Road” policy, translation plays an increasingly critical role. Translating the internal meaning of a work allows a better integration of the two languages and cultures. In the era of cultural exchanges, it is necessary to strengthen the understanding of the differences between Chinese and Western thinking patterns and expressions, and use appropriate strategies in translation. We have a responsibility to take Chinese culture abroad, so that more people can see the vastness of Chinese culture.

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