

On the Translation of Chinese Four-Character Idioms in *Selected Modern Chinese Essays 1*

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Chinese idioms are vivid and meaningful, which are the essence of national language. However, due to the great differences between Chinese and western cultures, the translation of Chinese idioms is an extremely complex task. In view of the importance and complexity of its translation, with the translation of Chinese four-character idioms in *Selected Modern Chinese Essays 1* as its theme, the paper aims to investigate the application of different translation methods in C-E translation, and adopts Yan Fu's theory of "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance" to judge the translation effects. Through a summary and study of the form and translation effect of idioms, the paper finds that literal translation is often used for straightforward idioms, while free translation is often used for idioms with an extended meaning, and context should be considered when selecting translation methods.

Keywords: four-character idioms, Zhang Peiji, literal translation, free translation

Introduction

Literary translation and free translation are two important concepts in Chinese and western translation theories. Discussions about literal translation and free translation had existed since the translation began to be a discipline and continued throughout the whole process of the emergence and development of translation theory. With the development of globalization, literary translation is becoming more and more momentous. Chinese and foreign scholars have conducted extensive research on idioms carrying national culture.

The anthology of *Selected Modern Chinese Essays* by Zhang Peiji contains a large number of representative works of excellent Chinese writers since the May 4th Movement (Zhang, 2007), which provides a typical example for the study of the stylistic characteristics and translation of modern prose. The translation studies of domestic scholars mainly focus on culture and translation effect, such as comparing the cultural differences between English and Chinese, analysing the cultural connotation of idioms, and learning the translation methods of idioms from the perspective of social semiotics, relevance translation theory, and functional equivalence. Most of these studies focus on the final translation results of the whole article or the cultural connotation of idioms in the book, while there are few studies on the translation methods of four-character idioms in the book. Idioms are the embodiment of Chinese culture. Mastering the translation methods of idioms is helpful to better understand and spread Chinese culture. It would thus be of interest to learn the translation methods of four-character idioms in *Selected Modern Chinese Essays 1*. Therefore, the paper analyses how to choose the methods between literal

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translation and free translation, and their influence on translation effects. Meanwhile, it will use Yan Fu's theory of faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance as a standard to judge the translation.

Literature Review

Definition: Translation and Idiom

Peter Newmark argues that the main problem in translation is the understanding of "meaning" (Newmark, 1991). When we try to translate one language into another, some meaning disappears inevitably. It is almost impossible to find complete equivalence in two languages. The only thing the translator can do is to shorten the distance of missing meaning. Therefore, Newmark puts forward that translation is a tool to make up the gap between languages (Newmark, 1991). People in different languages can communicate to each other, which shows that the language is translatable. But there are some words that people cannot convey clearly, so there are some restrictions in translation, which is the untranslatability of language. Therefore, it is not easy to make up for the gap in translation.

Chinese idioms are a major feature of Chinese traditional culture, with fixed structural forms and fixed statements. A large part of idioms is inherited from ancient times. It represents a story or allusion, and some idioms are even a miniature sentence. Sun (2013) claimed, "Idiom refers to a stereotyped phrase or short sentence that has been used by people for a long time, with concise form and incisive meaning" (p. 105). In any language, idioms carry their own historical and cultural traditions; thus they are not easy to be held.

Difficulties in Idiom Translation

Language is not only the product of culture, but also the carrier of it. English and Chinese idioms are closely connected with culture, carrying different features and cultural information, reflecting their effulgent culture. The rich and colorful cultural background makes the translation of idioms not an easy task.

First of all, in terms of origin, English and Chinese idioms contain many cultural differences relating to many factors, such as religion, history, and region, and so on. For example, the literal translation of "Achilles' heel" is "阿克勒斯之踵", but such translation will make Chinese readers not understand its real meaning: the only fatal weakness. These cultural differences bring some difficulties to understand the meaning of idioms. Secondly, the metaphors used in English and Chinese idioms are different. For example, Chinese will use "挥金如土" (literally, "spend money like mud") to describe a person's extreme waste and extravagance, while the English prefer to use "spend money like water" as a metaphor. In addition, there are fixed usages in English and Chinese idioms, which will cause the understanding headwinds.

Previous Studies on the Idiom Translation Methods

Many scholars at home and abroad have done relevant research on the translation of idioms. They have shown the translation methods and strategies of idioms from different perspectives.

There are few literatures on idiom translation by foreign scholars, and most of them focus on idiom translation in novels and related to animals. For example, some scholars have studied the translation of animal idioms from English into their corresponding languages (Feysa, 2019; Nguyen & Vu, 2019). Some cognitive linguists believe that the meaning of idioms can be explained by their components (Cacciari & Patrizia, 1993). Different from the dimension of animal idioms, the dimension of novels usually focuses on the translation

strategies of idioms. Gabriella once analysed the translation strategies of idioms in the novel *Game of Thrones* (Kovács, 2016). Through the translation strategies of idioms in *The Great Gatsby*, Harmon concluded that idioms have not been recognized as an effective translation technology (Harmon, 2021).

Domestic scholars' studies on the translation of Chinese idioms mostly focus on the perspective of culture and translation methods. In the field of cultural studies, Chinese scholars tend to compare the cultural differences between China and Britain (Zhang, 1999; Huang, 2006). In addition, some scholars carried out studies that focus on the cultural connotation of idioms (Y. Y. Li, X. Li, & Wang, 1999). Secondly, in the field of translation methods, there are studies, such as Heng's study, from the perspective of social semiotics (Heng, 2003); some are on the basis of relevance translation theory, such as a study conducted by Mo and Ge (2012); and some studies are based on the perspective of cultural schema theory, such as An's study (2023). In addition, Wang have studied the translation of Chinese idioms based on linguistics in 2019 and Zhou based on corpus in 2013 (Wang, 2019; Zhou, 2013). In terms of idiom format, another scholar Zhang has also done research on AABB style Chinese idiom translation (Zhang, 2018).

However, there is no systematic research on all forms of four-character idioms in a large number of documents. Therefore, this paper will explore the translation of all forms of Chinese four-character idioms in this book based on different translation methods.

Translation Standard

An Introduction to *Selected Modern Chinese Essays 1*

Lots of Chinese scholars have translated the thoughts or theories of some western intellectuals and introduced them to the Chinese people in the past century. However, few Chinese scholars have taken the initiative to transmit our ideas to foreigners. Professor Zhang Peiji's series *Selected Modern Chinese Essays* makes up for this deficiency (Zhu, 2000). These books are limited in length, but they cover a large number of profound and representative proses written by outstanding Chinese writers since the May 4th Movement in 1919. These writers or celebrities include Li Dazhao, Fang Zhimin, Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, and so on.

The book contains 52 modern Chinese proses, in Chinese and English, with notes and a brief introduction to the original author. For a long time, it has a lot of readers in China translation and has been highly praised by the translation circle. Therefore, this study chooses *Selected Modern Chinese Essays 1* as a case study.

Yan Fu's Translation Theory

Yan Fu, an enlightenment thinker in the late Qing Dynasty, put forward "faithfulness, expressiveness, elegance" in his translated work *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays*. "Faithfulness" means that the meaning does not contradict the original text, that is, the translation should be accurate, without deviating, omitting, increasing, or decreasing the meaning at will; "expressiveness" refers to not sticking to the original form, and the translation is smooth and clear; and "elegance" means that the words used in the translation should be appropriate and pursue the simplicity and beauty of language. In Yan Fu's thought, "faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance" are not juxtaposed relations. "Faithfulness" is the core, while "expressiveness" and "elegance" are both tools to reach a good translation (Lin, 2000). Yan Fu's theory is regarded as the standard of translation by later scholars, and used to judge the quality of translation.

Translation Methods

Selection of Translation Methods

The types of idioms and the context of the article are both factors affecting translation. The idiom translation methods in this book can be roughly summarized into three kinds: literal translation, free translation, and the combination of literal translation and free translation.

Literal translation. Literal translation is not a rigid translation from one word to another, but a translation without much expansion and annotation. In the translation of English and Chinese idioms, literal translation can retain the meaning of words, convey the rhetorical style of the original text, and achieve the self-evident effect of metaphor idioms. Therefore, in literary translation, if the original image without complex cultural connotation is directly projected into translation, literal translation will encourage readers to imagine more instead of hindering understanding. In this case, the translator can use literal translation to deal with the original text.

Source text: 黄与绿主宰着，无边无垠，坦荡如砥……（茅盾《白杨礼赞》）

Target text: The boundless highland, with dominant yellow and green, is flat like a whet stone.

“坦荡如砥” means “as flat as a knife sharpening stone”. In the book, the author uses the idiom to describe the magnificent scene of flat and broad on the surface of the Loess Plateau. The translator adopts the literal translation method, retains the original metaphor, and helps the target readers give full play to their imagination. Faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance are all embodied in this translation. If free translation is used here, it may limit the reader’s thinking so they cannot feel the unique emptiness and openness above the plateau.

Source text: 只好带玩笑的说，“吉人天相，”安慰他们激动的心情。（叶圣陶《我坐了木船》）

Target text: By way of allaying their anxiety, I said jokingly, “A good guy always enjoys Heaven’s protection”.

The original meaning of the idiom “吉人天相” refers to a virtuous person who will be helped by the God. The translator writes it as “A good guy always enjoys Heaven’s protection”. In the sentence, “吉人” refers to a kind person, whose translation is “a good guy”, in line with the original meaning. Meanwhile, “天” is translated into “Heaven”, which is a common image in western life, showing faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance while achieving functional equivalence.

Source text: 对于书的贪念也已消除不少了，可不免要故态复萌。（夏丏尊《我之于书》）

Target text: My obsession with books has been very much on the decline. Nevertheless, I still cannot help slipping back into the same old rut.

“故态复萌” is often used as a derogatory idiom, which means the old problems reappeared. In Zhang’s translation, he translated it into “slipping back into the same old rut”. The phrase “slip back into” is a collocation, expressing falling into terrible situation vividly. The word “same” conveys “故” exactly. Moreover, “old rut” refers to the previous mark made by wheels of a vehicle, with a metaphor meaning of old things, especially in a bad state. Based on the analysis, this translation not only conveys the meaning of the original text, but also emotion. It meets the standard of faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance.

Free translation. Due to different cultures, languages, and customs between cultures, some words cannot be translated directly according to their literal meaning. Under this circumstance, the translator should consult a large number of documents to command related background knowledge and perform a free translation to facilitate

the understanding of the target language readers. Free translation is a method relative to literal translation. It refers to translating according to the main idea of the original text, rather than word by word.

Source text: 碰上个凡事只用耳朵听不用眼睛看的糊涂长官, 自然就博得了偏爱, 于是一帆风顺, 扶摇直上了。(谢逸《下蛋、唱鸡及其它》)

Target text: He will naturally find favor with a muddle-headed boss who trusts his ears more than his eyes. The braggart will thus find himself quickly climbing up the social ladder.

The original text uses two consecutive idioms “一帆风顺” and “扶摇直上”. The translator combines the two idioms and translates them into “rapidly climbing the social ladder”, so there are omissions. In the sentence, “climbing a ladder” is an English idiom, which is well known to English readers. Therefore, the translator uses this idiom to avoid information redundancy and make the translation concise and clear. Faithfulness and expressiveness are reached. In addition, the translator divides the original text according to its meaning to make the structure clear. The translation reads very smoothly, and the simple language reproduces the beauty of the original and embodies elegance.

Source text: 说一句过火的话, 我简直是提心吊胆, 心里不得安宁。(季羨林《黎明前的北京》)

Target text: To exaggerate it a bit, that keeps me in constant suspense and makes me fidgety.

The translation of “提心吊胆” in this sentence has nothing to do with heart (心) and gallbladder (胆), but adopts the metaphorical meaning of the idiom. The original meaning of “提心吊胆” is to describe a person who is worried about things and is very afraid. “In constant suspension” not only translates the mood of panic, but also reflects the duration of the upset. The translation also meets the criteria of Yan Fu’s translation theory. If literal translation is adopted here, the meaning of the translation is quite different from that of the original text.

Combination of literal translation and free translation. Chinese idioms generally have their own unique structure and meaning, especially some idioms with Chinese traditional cultural significance. Therefore, translators sometimes have to combine literal translation with free translation. On the basis of literal translation, the method of free translation is used to supplement the content that the target reader lacks in the cognitive environment but is necessary to understand Chinese idioms.

Source text: 真正的朋友, 恐怕要算“总角之交”或“竹马之交”了。(夏丏尊《中年人的寂寞》)

Target text: Real friendship between two persons originates perhaps from the time of life when they were children playing innocently together.

There are two idioms in this sentence, namely “总角之交” and “竹马之交”. Both idioms are related to Chinese culture. “总角” is a kind of children’s hairstyle in ancient China. In the idiom, it means friends in childhood. Zhang Peiji’s translation successfully conveys the meaning of idioms through literal translation and interpretation. In translation, Zhang used the adverb “innocently” to express the emotional innocence between friends whose hairstyle is called “总角” when they were young. Secondly, the words “play together” replace the complex meaning of “竹马”. For one thing, the target language retains the cultural meaning of the source language; for another, it fully reflects the pragmatic meaning of the source language, so that the target language readers can obtain more cultural information. In order to enable target readers to grasp the meaning quickly, the image of “竹马” is omitted here for its complex culture background, but there is no omission at the meaning level. Therefore, the translation is faithful in meaning.

Conclusions

According to Nida, an American translation theorist, translation refers to reproducing the information conveyed by the source text from semantics to style in the closest, most natural and equivalent language in the target language (Nida & Taber, 1969). It can be seen that translators need to master many skills and knowledge. Chinese idioms are the national cultural heritage and cultural crystallization, so it is more difficult to translate them. This study lists the Chinese four-character idioms in *Selected Modern Chinese Essays I* and analyses the translation methods. The following conclusions can be drawn.

The idiom translation methods in this book can be roughly divided into literal translation and free translation, and a small number of idioms adopt the combination of the two translation methods. Most idioms are straightforward, so there are more idioms adopting literal translation in this book. Idioms with metaphor or connotation are more likely to adopt free translation. The two methods have their own effects relatively. Literal translation is more faithful to the original text and can retain the original form and content. Free translation is better in expressiveness, which is not confined to the form of the original text and is conducive to the understanding of the target readers. They are interrelated and complementary to each other. In the process of translation, only the perfect combination of the two can produce excellent translation works.

Taking Yan Fu's theory as the translation standard, almost all idioms in this book are translated properly. Only a few idioms omit complex cultural images due to cultural constraints, but it does not affect reading. However, due to the lack of time and knowledge, the study failed to find all the four-character idioms in the book, and some four-character words may be regarded as idioms. Besides, the study only analyses four-character idioms, but there are many other forms of idioms in Chinese, such as three-character, six-character, and even eight-character idioms. Future research should focus on more types of idiom translation. Finally, this study only analyses literal translation and free translation, but in fact, there are many translation methods. In Chapter Five of *A Textbook of Translation*, British translation theorist Newmark came up with eight kinds of translation methods (Newmark, 1987). Future research should focus on analysing the application of other types of translation methods in idiom translation, so as to draw a more comprehensive conclusion on the selection of Chinese idiom translation methods.

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