

# A Study of Pearl Buck's Translation View of Cultural Symbiosis

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Based on the theory of cultural symbiosis put forward by Mr. Zhang Liwen, this paper summarizes the translation view of cultural symbiosis, and uses it to explain the relevant characteristics of the Noble laureate Pearl Buck's English translation of *All Men Are Brothers*. This paper, through laying out Buck's cultural harmony value full in her translated work, probes into the connotation, manifestation, and enlightenment of Pearl Buck's idea of a harmonious symbiosis of Chinese and Western cultures.

**Keywords:** Pearl S. Buck, *All Men Are Brothers*, Chinese and Western cultures, cultural symbiosis

## Introduction

The theory of cultural symbiosis, put forward by Mr. Zhang Liwen, emphasizes the harmony, cooperation, and common development among different cultures (Zhang, 1996, p. 13). In the field of translation, the view of cultural symbiosis aims to promote the intercultural understanding and melding of different cultures, respect cultural differences, pursue cultural equality, and realize common cultural prosperity (Ye, 2008). Standing between Chinese and Western cultures all her life, the Noble laureate Pearl S. Buck (1892-1973) intimately experienced and interpreted the essence of and the differences and clash between the two cultures from her unique bifocal perspective. She devoted herself to the promotion of a harmonious symbiosis of Chinese and Western cultures through her life-long literary creation and intercultural activities. Taking her English translation of *All Men Are Brothers* for example, her cultural harmony value is shown from the beginning to the very end.

## Buck's Translation View of Cultural Symbiosis

### Respecting Cultural Differences

The translation view of cultural symbiosis holds that it is an objective fact that there are differences between different cultures, and translation should respect these differences. When Pearl Buck translated *All Men Are Brothers*, she fully realized the differences between Chinese and Western cultures and tried to preserve the characteristics of Chinese culture. For example, in the original Shuihu novels, whenever a new character is introduced, there will always be such expressions as “姓甚名谁?”, “(官人)高姓大名?”, and “(小人)姓某, 名某” for asking or introducing the name. Buck went out of her way to emphasize the difference between “surname” and “name” in Chinese, translating them as “What are your high surname and your great name?”, “My surname is, and my name is”. She also reproduced the respectful third-person address terms and humble self-address terms in Chinese-style question-and-answer, such as “大人” (the honorable one), “足下”

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(the noble one), “壮士” (the brave one), “恩官” (Gracious one), “小人” (this humble one), “小可” (this lowly one), “小弟” (this humble brother), etc. After being exposed to such translations many times, English readers can personally feel that the ancient China paid attention to etiquette, and hierarchy between superiors and inferiors.

### **Pursuing Cultural Equality**

In Pearl Buck's era of colonialism,

most Westerners who have been to the East parody, speak and define the East with curiosity and Western cultural superiority, positioning themselves as the legitimate and authoritative spokespersons or interpreters of the East. At the same time, they suppress the voices that really belong to the East. They hold the hegemony of discourse and interpret the East as they wish according to their own interests and needs. They replace the real image of the East with a distorted and mystified East to satisfy the psychological curiosity, cultural superiority and material interests of Westerners. (Zhu, 2006, p. 59)

However, as an admirer of Chinese culture, Pearl Buck's view of cultural symbiosis enabled her to truly reproduce and interpret China and introduce it to the world, not according to the wishes of Westerners, but according to her own perception, eliminating the Chinese people and culture distorted by Western cultural hegemony and replacing it with a positive and objective image. She not only accurately conveys the story of *Shui Hu Zhuan*, but also strives to show the values of Chinese culture. Therefore, it is not difficult to see that Pearl Buck's cultural syncretism had extremely precious value at that time.

### **Promoting Cultural Integration**

The translation view of cultural symbiosis emphasizes the integration and communication between cultures. In Pearl Buck's view,

There are differences, contradictions and conflicts between Eastern and Western cultures, but integration is the mainstream. As long as the two sides respect each other and communicate more, they can learn from each other's strengths, and advance harmoniously, finally reaching the realm of unity. (Ye, 2008, p. 66)

This realm is exactly the highest pursuit of Pearl Buck. In her rendering of *Shui Hu Zhuan*, she focused on the content of the original text and its language as well. She created a large number of English vocabularies and sentence patterns with salient Chinese features, which reflect the spirit of the Chinese characters and the Chinese way of thinking. China English in *All Men Are Brothers* has seized the subconscious expectations of Westerners for a Chinese text, giving readers sufficient space for imagination and enriching the target language. It contributes to undercutting the hegemonic agenda of the West and the dissemination of Chinese language and culture over the world.

## **Formation Factors of Pearl Buck's Translation View of Cultural Symbiosis**

### **Her Transnational Life Experiences, Education, and Insights**

Pearl Buck was born into an American missionary family. She came to China with her missionary parents when she was just three months old and lived in Zhenjiang, Suzhou, and Nanjing for nearly 40 years. Her parents chose to live near the Chinese people, so that she grew up in a Chinese environment, familiar with Chinese culture and common people's thinking. His father, Sai Zhaoxiang, was a persistent missionary and had a profound influence on Pearl Buck. Her mother, Kelly, was enthusiastic and cheerful and had literary accomplishment,

giving Pearl Buck enlightenment education. In Zhenjiang, Chinese nanny and cooks became her guides to learn about Chinese culture. She received a bilingual education from an early age, being influenced by Western culture and learning Confucian classics from the scholar Kong. When she grew up, she went to college in the United States to experience the cultural differences between China and the West. After her marriage, she deepened her understanding of northern Chinese culture in Suzhou, Anhui Province, and socialized with celebrities in Nanjing. Influenced by the May Fourth Movement, she gained a deeper understanding of Chinese society and culture. In Nanjing, she studied Chinese classical novels with the help of Mr. Long Moxiang, which paved the way for her future literary creation and the translation of *Shui Hu Zhuan*.

### **The Awkward Identity of a Cultural Marginal Person**

“A cultural marginal person is the one who sits between the two cultural groups, a new generation in a clash of cultures, who has both cultures at the same time but does not fully belong to either” (Tang, 2010, p. 35). As a “stranger” who grew up in the “double world”, Pearl Buck had a deep experience of cultural separation caused by differences in race and skin color; especially when the two cultures conflicted and confronted each other, she felt that she could not find any sense of belonging.

Throughout her life she created more than 50 literary works, most of which were related to China. Her translations are few but quite famous. The translation of *Shui Hu Zhuan* is an important effort to realize her ideal of cultural symbiosis. Therefore, she is called “a bridge connecting Eastern and Western cultures”. “Through her delicate brushwork, Westerners came to understand a different and real side of that distant and mysterious country, China” (Nobel Prize in Literature award citation).

### **Reflection on and Recognition of Chinese and Western Cultures**

Pearl Buck was a cultural hybrid and a wanderer. She reflected on the cultural conflict between China and the West and finally realized that the root cause of misunderstanding between China and the West was lack of communication. She perceptibly observed that

In American popular novels and movies, the villains are all cunning and have a dark heart and are from eastern countries. While in Chinese novels or movies, the villain is tall, has blue eyes, a high nose, curly red hair, an English figure and an English expression. The villain is always that guy on the other side. (Yao, 2001, p. 108)

Chinese people do not fundamentally understand Americans, and Americans also hold prejudices against Chinese people. From her own experiences and as a cultural marginal man, she examines Chinese and Western cultures in a neutral manner and forms a view of cultural symbiosis. Her translation of the title of *Shui Hu Zhuan* as “*All Men Are Brothers*” is an interpretation of her ideal of cultural harmony.

### **Translation Strategies of Cultural Symbiosis**

Known as the “encyclopedia of feudal society”, *Shui Hu Zhuan* covers all kinds of social situations ranging from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism to official names, place names, costumes, weapons, and dialects in the Northern Song Dynasty, and has extremely rich cultural connotations. In order to introduce the unfamiliar Zhang Hui literary style to the target readers, Pearl Buck took great pains in translation. She meticulously reproduced the antithetical form and content of each chapter title of the Zhang Hui style novel. The original work included poems, ci, songs, lists, letters, edicts, notices, proverbs, sayings, etc. Pearl Buck fully translated all of them, while other translated versions have deletions to varying degrees. Here is an example of proverb translation.

Example: 自古道：世情看冷暖，人面逐高低。(Chapter 37)

Buck's version: The proverb says, "Men's hearts distinguish between rich and poor; their smiles follow the high, their frowns the low." (Chapter 37)

Shapiro's version: "Guide your actions by the moods of the powerful, treat a man according to his status," as the old saying goes. (Chapter 37)

Young's version: As they say, "The world's favour goes with fortune, men's kindness is linked to rank." (Chapter 37)

In Buck's translation, she successfully transfers both the surface and the deep meaning of the original Chinese proverb. In the sentence, the meaning of the proverb is first elaborated, followed by a literal translation of the proverb. In this way, both the unique metaphor in the Chinese language and the cultural image of "人面" are well retained. In contrast, the other two translators simply domesticate the original proverb by preserving its functional meaning.

Buck was faithful in terms of not only the words on surface, but the word structure, sentence pattern features, rhetorical devices, rhyme, and modes of thinking between the lines. For example, the word "分手" in Chinese gives the intuitive impression that the hands that were previously held together have loosened, and in the same way, in the word "下手", the action occurs as the "hand" falls. Buck deliberately disassembled these fixed words and retained the original Chinese "hand" image, translating them as "part my hand from yours" and "Don't let your hands fall!" Chinese figurative thinking is more reflected in four-character idioms, and these images become very vivid after her literal translation. For example, "（吓得）屁滚尿流" is translated as "(so frightened that) his wind burst from him and his water came out of him", vividly showing Xi Menqing's panic-stricken mess after "getting caught". Even some "dead" images, such as "heaven", "earth", and "teeth" in "欢天喜地" and "不足挂齿", she tried to revive them and translate them as "glad to Heaven and joyous to earth" and "need not hang upon the teeth". Although the translations appear somewhat strange, they are not difficult to understand under chewing. Most importantly, they are beautiful with Chinese flavor in the eyes of Westerners. Donner, director of Pearl Buck House Museum in Buck County, USA, spoke highly of Pearl Buck's translation style in the interview. She believed that Pearl Buck's translation style was "a style of delivery of Chinese language" (Tang, 2010, p. 58). Her translation style evolves from her infinite admiration for Chinese culture, hoping to promote cultural exchanges between the East and the West.

## Conclusion

Pearl Buck's translation of *All Men Are Brothers* aims not only to introduce, interpret, and disseminate Chinese culture to the West, but also to pursue equality, justice, and communication. With a mentality of cultural equality, she endeavors to realize her cultural vision of integrating Chinese and Western cultures. Buck's translation has been successful for more than 80 years, and her translation strategy of "highlighting differences and intentionally hybridizing" was valuable at that time. At present, this strategy has important implications for translation studies. Its value lies not only in providing a direction for cross-cultural communication, but also in Pearl Buck's sense of responsibility to shatter the unequal cultural power relations, which is known as translation ethics. Her idea of a harmonious symbiosis can serve as a great enlightening resource for the construction of a harmonious global cultural system in the context of globalization.

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