

A Post-colonialism Approach to Intentional Mistranslation —Comparative Study of Two English Versions of *Shuo Ren**

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Mistranslation has always been received with negative reactions among the translation community for a long time. Post-colonial translation theory forms an intersection with translatology and brings translation studies from linguistics to the hidden factors such as politics, cultures and aesthetics that influence the formation of translations. From the perspective of post-colonial translation theory, this article makes comparisons with intentional mistranslation among the two English versions of *Shuo Ren*, and analyzes the causes that affect the intentional mistranslation of different translators. In conclusion, translators in strong cultures may misuse intentional mistranslation to “dump” their own culture, political views, or religious beliefs, so as to promote cultural aggression against the colonized or former colonial countries. In addition, domestic translators should adopt appropriate intentional mistranslation to ensure more acceptance and spreading of Chinese culture in the world.

Keywords: intentional mistranslation, post-colonialism, cultural communication

1. Introduction

1.1 Post-colonialism Translation Theory

Since the rise of post-colonialism theory in the late 20th century, it has formed many intersections with various humanities disciplines. Translatology is no exception. The combination of post-colonialism theory and translation studies enables translation researchers to recognize translation activities from social, political, and cultural perspectives.

In the late 1980s, Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere's announcement of the concept “cultural turn” is the beginning of post-colonial translation studies. The historical and hegemonic factor in post-colonial theory combines with translation, which gives translation political complexion. Other from traditional translation studies concentrating on the text itself, post-colonial translation theory pays more attention to the external constraints on the translations and the impact of translations on the target culture. In other words, it concerns

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more about cultural differentials and cultural struggles hidden behind the translation and the inequality between strong and weak culture.

1.2 Intentional Mistranslation

In literary translation, it is inevitable to conduct mistranslation, which appears to be divided into two different kinds, unconscious mistranslation and intentional mistranslation.

Causes of unconscious mistranslation includes translators' careless attitudes or negligence on certain key points; translators' weak mastery of source language; translators' improper understanding of cultural differences between target language country and source language country. All these could be minimized if translators achieve higher professional proficiency (Zeng, 2015).

Different from unconscious mistranslation, intentional mistranslation has nothing to do with the translator's mastery of languages or knowledge of cultural differences, of which one presumably fails to be aware. It is a kind of mistranslation caused by translator's subjective choices, concerning intricate factors of various kinds.

Much attention has been paid to the influence of post-colonialism on various kinds of translation and subjectivity of translators on intentional mistranslation. Nevertheless, fewer studies have applied post-colonialism theory in the analysis intentional mistranslation. With the combination of post-colonial translation theory and intentional mistranslation, we can easily find that appropriate intentional mistranslation is an effective strategy in literary translation, which has a positive influence on the communication and dissemination of the cultures of various countries and the opposition of cultural hegemony (Zhao, 2016).

2. A post-colonial Perspective on Intentional Mistranslation Based on Two English Versions of *Shuo Ren* from *The Book of Songs*

In the past, translation theorists analyzed intentional mistranslation mostly from text itself or translator's subjective initiative, while the post-colonial translation theory provides a new perspective on the mistranslation of this kind, taking into account the translator's historical and political background as well as aesthetic influence. The following sections analyze intentional mistranslation by different authors, taking two English translations of *Shuo Ren* will be used as an example.

The Duke's Bride belongs to *The Book of Songs*, the first collection of poems in ancient China. The poem recounts the grand occasion when Zhuang Jiang, the daughter of Duke Zhuang of Qi, marries Duke Wei, describing her distinguished family, stunning beauty, and magnificence of the wedding scene in turn. The most well-known lines of this poem are the descriptions of Zhuang Jiang's appearance, namely “手如柔荑，肤如凝脂，颈如蝤蛴，齿如瓠犀，螓首蛾眉，巧笑倩兮，美目盼兮”，which will be mainly discussed in the following section.

2.1 Differences in Intentional Mistranslation between the Two English Versions by Legge and Wang Rongpei

By a careful analysis of the two English versions of *Shuo Ren* by Legge and Wang Rongpei, the author will explore the causes and meanings of intentional mistranslation from the perspective of post-colonial translation theory.

For the sake of comparison, the two translations are transcribed as follows:

Her fingers were like the blades of the young white grass,
 Her skin was like congealed ointment,
 Her neck was like the tree grub,
 Her teeth were like the melon seeds,
 Her forehead cicada—like,
 Her eyebrows like the antlers of silkworm moth.
 What dimples, as she artful smiled!
 How lovely her eyes, with the black and white so well defined! (Legge, 1994)

Her hands are small, her fingers slim;
 Her skin is smooth as cream.
 Her swan—like neck is long and slim;
 Her teeth like pearls do gleam.
 A broad forehead and arching brow complement her dimpled cheeks and make her black eyes glow. (Wang, 1995)

2.1.1 Literary Genre

As is well known, *The Book of Songs* boasts its distinctive sentence patterns and rhyme schemes with a strong sense of rhythm, being of great help to its rhetoric and expression of meaning. Therefore, versions that fail to express the rhythmic beauty can hardly convey similar moods and meanings to those of the original poems. As a result, the English versions should preferably adopt rhyme poetry.

Focusing on Legge's translation, however, the full text is presented in prose with few rhythms. Despite a full translation of the original meaning, this version has lost the unique rhythm sense of *The Book of Songs*. Was it just unconscious mistranslation caused by his ignorance of literary characteristics of the original work? That is not the case. In his *Introduction* to this version, he clearly mentioned the linguistic and writing features and even pointed out that rhythm was the most appropriate literary form of translating *The Book of Songs*. It can be easily inferred that Legge is fully aware of the significance of rhyme to the masterpiece, but still deliberately and stubbornly adopts the form of prose rather than rhythm.

In contrast, Wang Rongpei selects rhymed verse to translate *The Books of Songs* with an /m/ end rhyme, and endeavors to be as close as possible to the original poem in terms of form, which is mainly reflected in the number of chapters, lines, and words per line. Instead of word-to-word translation, Wang chooses to handle the word order flexibly to better convey the deep meaning and emotion implicit in the lines of the original verse. Overall, all these efforts make the translation to be more comprehensive and impressive.

2.1.2 Description of Images

“柔夷”, “凝脂”, “螭螭” and “螭首娥眉” are the tropes suggestive of ancient Chinese characteristics, which cannot be understood easily in literal translation. Legge, however, translates every word directly with no change in word order, vocabulary selection or structure in order to be “faithful”. Moreover, those obscure images that Chinese native speakers feel difficult to understand are almost equipped with detailed annotations. Overall, his works can be described as “encyclopedic” translation.

In contrast, in Wang's version, all these classical metaphors describing the ancient Eastern beauty are hidden and replaced by the simile more closed to the Western beauty, such as “skin like cream”, “neck like swan”, “teeth like pearls”. Through reading this version, it is hard to recognize that the heroine is an Oriental

beauty, but more like an English country beauty immersed in an idyllic atmosphere in the 18th century. Apparently, it is not an unconscious mistranslation caused by Wang's weak proficiency in target language. Wang is an outstanding translator with great attainments in the field of translating ancient Chinese classics into English. His works have received highly valued and praised by scholars home and abroad, so it is not hard to infer that this part belongs to intentional mistranslation.

2.2 Causes of Intentional Mistranslation in Post-colonialism

From the perspective of post-colonialism, translators have consciously considered ideology, politics, aesthetics in the process of translation, and deliberately rewrite, add, or delete the original text when necessary, and change the meaning and style of the original text so as to make it more acceptable to the target readers (Zhang, 2020).

2.2.1 Political Consideration

As a missionary, Legge first came to China to spread Christianity in the new British colony, Hong Kong. It was worth mentioning that in order to do a better job, missionaries must fully understand Chinese culture while reading Chinese classics was one of the best ways. Therefore, a lot of missionaries chose to translate Chinese masterpieces. Legge was one of them. Hence, it was evident that James' motives for translating *The Book of Songs* were not pure, whose motive partly was to lead more missionaries to know about the thoughts of ancient Chinese sages and explore the basis of Chinese morality, society, politics and life, so as to better disseminate Christian ideas (Legge, 1960).

As a result, one of the reasons for his mistranslation is that the effort-consuming version of the rhymed verse is unnecessary for him, in that he pays more attention to the practicality than the aesthetic value of *The Book of Songs*.

In addition, in the third chapter of his *Introduction*, he once said, "It is naturally appropriate to translate verse poems in rhyme form, but the translator must have a full understanding of the original work" and "Generally speaking, the collection is not yet worthy of translation into rhymed verse." Clearly, Legge at that time deemed that he could have striven to do more to translate *The Book of Songs* into rhymes, but it was not worth his doing so. Another deeper reason why he mistranslates is that he judges Chinese Confucian classics from a superior point of view and looks at Chinese culture with suspicion.

As a missionary and a colonialist, Legge is scarcely possible to keep a neutral attitude in his translation of *The Book of Songs*. Naturally, it is no surprise that he chooses to use no rhyme to translate, but uses prose instead.

As a well-known English educator and translator in China as well as a patriotic Chinese citizen, Wang purposes more to the spreading of Chinese culture to the world and a wider range of foreign readers for *The Book of Songs*, which requires that his translation must be easy to be understandable, catchy and conducive to spread. Therefore, by intentional mistranslation, Wang changes the obscure Oriental images into simple ones which are familiar to Westerners and imply similar metaphorical meanings to the original text, such as "swans" and "pearls" rather than "ointment" or "melon seeds". The familiar images can also be a reduction to the strangeness and addition to the familiarity of Westerners to *The Book of Songs*, so as to facilitate its dissemination. Wang once made an explanation in an article that the target audience of his translation was not

western scholars or researchers, but the general public, which meant the acceptance level of the general public should be considered in the translation process.

2.2.2 Historical Background

As a famous modern British sinologist and a missionary of the London Missionary Society, Legge went to Hong Kong to preach Christian mission in 1843.

Viewed from the time background at that time, China was a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country, politically corrupted and socially unstable, almost without its own cultural discourse power in the international relationships. Hence, China had a weak culture. Britain, on the contrary, which had just completed its industrial revolution, obtaining prosperous economic development internally and ambitious aggression and expansion externally, which had a strong culture. An integration between strong and weak cultures was undoubtedly bound to be an unequal dialogue. The translator of the strong culture tends to have a strong sense of superiority, who may look down upon the weak culture and is convinced that his or her culture is more advanced and boasts more universal value than the weak one. Therefore, when Legge translated *The Book of Songs*, he said that "Generally speaking, the collection is not yet worthy of translation into rhymed verse".

In contrast, as a well-known English educator in China with a highly reputation home and abroad, Wang composed the English translation of *The Book of Songs* in 1995. Amid the accelerating process of globalization and increasingly frequent cultural communications, he introduced *The Book of Songs* to a wider range of readers in foreign countries and spread the unique charm of Chinese culture. Thus, his version is easy to understand.

2.2.3 Aesthetic Consideration

Aesthetics, deeply rooted in people's minds, tends to be influenced by culture, while different cultures contain different aesthetic standards and preferences. It is therefore natural and inevitable to mistranslate the imagery that expresses beauty in the culture.

For these images describing the beauty from 3,000 years ago, Legge translates them into completely literal translations. It seems difficult for westerners to imagine that such a strange woman with tender shoots hands, a sore grub neck and melon seeds teeth are a radiant beauty, as there are distinctive understandings of images representing beauty between Chinese and westerners. Therefore, it is not conducive for westerners' acceptance of such a poem.

As is known to all, the westerners favor a fleshy beauty with a high nose, deep eyes, a swan neck, and pearly white teeth. In order to make the poem more accessible to western readers, Wang westernizes the oriental beauty, adopting the images of a swan to describe the beauty's long and elegant neck and gestures, pearls to describe her white and even teeth. The heroine of the translation presents a fleshy and elegant beauty in front of the westerners, but it is a shame that the beauty in oriented characteristics cannot be read.

Mistranslation of this kind, however, is obviously more in line with the aesthetic preferences of westerners and more acceptable to western people, which is beneficial to remove the cultural barriers between China and the West and spread Chinese culture.

3. Reflections on the Two Versions and Inspirations

Although both two versions are classic works, they still contain some defects in cultural communications. The author will make brief evaluations on them respectively.

3.1 Brief Evaluations of the Two Versions

The intentional mistranslation used by Legge in his translation in 1871 implies a colonialist's attitude towards Chinese culture with his high superiority, which seems to be contempt to Eastern culture; while Wang's translation reflects the lack of Chinese cultural discourse to some extent, though his intentions are kind. Furthermore, complete westernization is not beneficial to the dissemination of Chinese culture because it fails to present unique cultural images of China. After all, if cultural images like this, which contain the essence of Chinese culture, are assimilated, too much of our cultural message will be lost (Spivak, 1988). However, if the essence of Eastern culture is abandoned in this way, it cannot promote cultural exchanges and developments in the long run.

3.2 Inspirations

Therefore, domestic translators should take up the important task of introducing Chinese culture to the world, which could encourage the breaking of the East-West dichotomy and the diversified development of the world. Appropriate intentional mistranslation can be adopted to ensure more acceptance. At the same time, the images with Chinese characteristics cannot be completely mistranslated into images that are commonly accepted and familiar to westerners intentionally, which may result in a lack of the discourse power and an adverse impact on the dissemination of Chinese culture. From the perspective of post-colonialism, translators should find the balance between the target culture and the source culture.

4. Conclusion

Based on a thorough analysis and comparison with intentional mistranslation in two English versions of Shuo Ren from the perspective of post-colonialism, the following findings and suggestions could be generalized.

Firstly, translators in strong cultures may misuse intentional mistranslation to “dump” their own culture, political views, or religious beliefs, so as to promote cultural aggression against the colonized or former colonial countries (Chen & Yi, 2011). Secondly, intentional mistranslation has its limitations: if translators from weak cultures cater for the cultural preferences of readers in strong cultural backgrounds, in order to spread national works abroad, intentional mistranslation can result in the loss of the local cultural discourse power. Therefore, translators should always prevent intentional mistranslation from promoting cultural colonization. Lastly, researchers should study the text about its hidden factors that influence the translation from the post-colonial perspective rather than reading and appreciating the text. It is hoped that this paper can bring some inspirations for the recognition of intentional mistranslation from the perspective of post-colonialism.

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