

A Study on the Translation of Chinese Four-Character Phrases— Taking the *Iconology of the Decorated Writing-Paper of the Ten Bamboo Studio* as an Example

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The book named *Iconology of the Decorated Writing-Paper of the Ten Bamboo Studio* is a collection of arch and woodblock paintings of Ming Dynasty, which is translated by the authors of this paper. The translation of this book is mainly about the notes and provenance of the paintings. The goal of this paper is to describe the translation activity of Chinese four-character phrases with the practical translation methods and techniques including paraphrase, omission, addition, and shift, which is the most difficult part during the translation process of this book. The author in this paper hopes that the methods for the translation of Chinese four-character phrases will provide certain help for the understanding and spread of Chinese classical stories from the book *Iconology of the Decorated Writing-Paper of the Ten Bamboo Studio*.

Keywords: Iconology of the Decorated Writing-Paper of the Ten Bamboo Studio, four-character phrases, translation strategies

Introduction

In the process of translating the book *Iconology of the Decorated Writing-Paper of the Ten Bamboo Studio*, 118 cases were selected from the project, including 26 cases applying omission translation method accounting for 22.0% of the total, 45 cases applied shift translation method, accounting for 38.1%, two cases applied addition, accounting for 1.8% of the total, and 45 cases applied paraphrase, accounting for 38.1%. Methods of paraphrase and shift are most frequently used, and the sum of the two reaches 76.2% of the whole. In this paper, the authors will separately illustrate the use of the four translation methods mentioned above in the translation practice, and at the same time the authors also explain the reasons for using these translation methods. It is intended to provide practical suggestions and references for the future translation of the painting, and at the same time contribute to the spread of Chinese culture.

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Paraphrase

Via a large number of translation cases, the authors found that when the first two words and the last two words of a four-character phrases are parallel, but of different expressions, the translation method of paraphrase can be applied. In addition, in this translation practice, the method of paraphrase also applied to descriptive words which involve behaviors, condition, and allusions.

Parallel Phrases

ST: 诗句意为韩康不看重金钱名利，自己在云山之中逍遥畅快地采药卖药。（隐逸01，韩康卖药）

TT: This means that Han Kang overlooked the fame and fortune, but stayed free and unfettered to gather and sell herbs in mountains instead.

In this example, the first two Chinese words “金钱” and the last two words “名利” with different meaning are parallel in structure. Expected horizon is a preconceived view of people's understanding. Specifically, in literary acceptance, it refers to a kind of appreciation request formed by the reader's original various experiences, interests, accomplishments, ideals, etc., which is expressed as a potential aesthetic expectation in specific reading (Zhu, 2004, p. 61). With the advancement of globalization, the horizon of the target reader and the author of the two terms, fame, and fortune can be well integrated. For this term, the translator can be sure that the target reader's aesthetic expectations are low based on the understanding of target readers, so the paraphrase translation method is adopted, and there is no additional expansion of supplementary content.

Descriptive Words

ST: 笺画作黄石持书视履之状，题“千载传黄石，嘉名意隐藏”。（隐逸03，黄石公）

TT: The Sage Called Huangshi Gong, was also known as The Old Man on Bridge. The painting shows the sage called Huangshi Gong looks at his shoes with books in hand. The story of him has been passed down for thousands of years, yet no one knows his real name.

The example is the description about behaviors. Generally speaking, the four-character phrases refer to the commonly used four-character phrases, especially four-character idioms, and the phrases that are temporarily combined according to the needs of the context (Lv, 2002, p. 4). This example “持书视履” is the last case. “Only when the literary work of art is expressed in a concrete way will it become an aesthetic object” (Roman, 1973, p. 372). The behavior in this case is described through paraphrase, so that the original information contained in the four-character phrase is embodied as an aesthetic object. For a previously unknown work, literary experience also requires prior knowledge. On this basis, all the new things we encounter can be accepted, that is, it is readable in the context of experience (Jauss, 1987, p. 29). The target reader has prior experience in the behavior of reading books, but the description of the direction is different from Chinese. Through paraphrase, the target reader can learn about the new culture based on past experience and meanwhile also enhance the target readers' understanding of Chinese culture.

ST: 柳下惠是遵守中国传统道德的典范，他“坐怀不乱”的故事广为传颂。（尚志02，柳下）

TT: He was one representative to uphold Chinese traditional virtues, being famous for a story of holding a woman in his lap without the slightest imputation on his moral character.



Figure 1. Under the Willow Trees.

This example is about allusion translation. “坐怀不乱” is one of the ancient Chinese allusions, which contains traditional Chinese impression of the gentleman, and this is also inseparable from China’s long-standing Confucian culture (see Figure 1). The “people” in Confucius’ eyes are gentlemen. Confucius has taught and educated people all his life, with the aim of cultivating “gentlemen”. A gentleman may refer to a person with power and position, or a person with both talent and moral character (Peng, 2019, pp. 53-65). In this translation, the translation method of paraphrase is adopted, and the four-character phrase is explained as concisely as possible. Through transmission process, the work is promoted to the reader, hopefully, a continuously changing experience horizon (Jauss, 1987, p. 24). It is expected that during the reading process, readers will be able to accept the cultural part contained in the allusions from passive to active acceptance, and finally realize the conversion from the present aesthetic standard to the new horizon.

Omission

In this translation practice, there were a total of 26 cases involving omission translation methods, including 12 cases omitting verbs, accounting for 44.4% of the total, eight cases omitting nouns, accounting for 29.6%, six cases omitting adjectives, accounting for 22.2%, and only one case omitting adverbs, accounting for 3.8%. After research, it is found that the translation method omission can be applied to translate four-character phrases in the following three situations. First, if the first two words and the last two words have repeated meanings, then one word may be omitted during the translation process. Second is the case that the four-character phrases contain degree modifiers. When the meaning expression is not affected, the degree word can be omitted. The last case is that the contents described in the four-character phrases have been mentioned above, to avoid redundancy it can be omitted during translation.

Omission About Words Involving Repeated Meaning

ST: 于是大家吃了这莲藕，人人都变得身健体壮，子孙后代也兴旺起来。(寿征08，雪藕)

TT: After taking these roots, everyone in the village obtained a good health and flourishing offspring.

In this example, the first two words and the last two words are with the same meaning. The four-character phrase is beautiful in three ways: in meaning, form and rhythm (Xu, 2003, p. 4). From the perspective of rhythm, phrases in Chinese are always formed in pairs even though the meanings are the same. So, the omission method is applied here for the consideration of conciseness.

Omission About Words Involving Degree Modifiers

ST: 长老及小和尚们分站两旁，目睹那遒劲的大字，赞叹不已。(敏学07，笔花)

TT: When Li Bai wrote this poem, the elder and the little monks in the temple stood in both sides. Seeing his excellent calligraphy, both the elder and the monks exclaimed admirations.

In this example, degree modifiers are involved in the original text. Understanding is the problem of participating in the communication between the readers and this article. The real purpose of understanding is to explore the issues raised in the article, and dialogue is where the interpreter continues to ask questions in the direction suggested by this article, triggered by the content of the article (Zhu, 2005, p. 7). The degree modifier does not affect the understanding of the text in this example and the English word “admiration” itself somewhat contains a kind of degree, that’s why the method omission is applied.

Addition

In this practice, only two cases involved addition method, both of which are verb additions. After research, the author found that in general, when translating nouns and adjectives, in order to increase the fluency of the text, verbs can be added.

ST: 林逋终生不仕不娶，也无子，唯独喜爱植梅养鹤，自谓“以梅为妻，以鹤为子”，人称“梅妻鹤子”。(隐逸09，林逋)

TT: This example involves addition about verbs. Lin never worked as a government official and he had neither wife nor son, but he described himself as “regarding plum trees as his wife and cranes as his sons” for he planted hundreds of plum trees and raised many cranes and they were his favorites.

In this example, the four-character phrase is a noun with a story about a poet in ancient China. Appropriate use of addition in English translation practice can make the translation smooth, natural, clear, and more in line with Chinese expression habits. In Chinese the phrase is already known by everyone, though it is a noun, people think about the story when they hear about the phrase. But without verb addition, target reader can hardly understand the meaning of a noun. Horizon means where we are in the world. However, when dealing with horizon, we cannot stand in a fixed position to see and think. In other words, horizon is not fixed. Instead, it changes with the observer’s positions and times. We can also define our horizons based on our ubiquitous prejudices, because these prejudices represent a certain “horizon”, beyond which people will know nothing (Jauss, 1987, p. 323). The target reader’s horizon in this example is restrained without knowing the story behind the phrase. With addition method applied, the story is introduced to the reader with new horizon, and thus the reader’s horizon has been expanded.

Shift

Macroscopically speaking, in this practice, the translation method mainly involves five aspects of conversion, including the lexical level, syntactic level, semantic level, cultural level, and word-sentence conversion among which 18 cases are about lexis accounting for 39.1% of the total, one case about syntax accounting for 2.2%, 21

cases about semantics, accounting for 45.7%, two cases about culture, accounting for 4.3%, and four conversions between words and sentences, accounting for 8.7% of the total. The lexical level and the semantic level account for a relatively large proportion, so the two are divided into more details. According to different parts of speech, cases related to lexis can be divided into verb-adjective conversion, noun-adjective conversion, verb-noun conversion, and adjective-adverb conversion among which noun-adjective conversion is relatively common, accounting for 50% of the total. Semantics conversion can be further divided into the following three categories: the conversion between specific-generalized, positive-negative, and fuzzy-clear among which positive-negative conversion and fuzzy-clear conversion account for a relatively large proportion, respectively 42.9% and 38.1%.

Shift at Lexical Level

ST: 陶渊明出身显赫世族，博学多才，曾任彭泽县令，后因不满当时权贵的腐朽，不愿为五斗米而折腰，而退隐田园，再不出世。（隐逸10，陶潜）

TT: Tao Yuanming, born from a distinguished family, was a brilliant man of wide learning and was a county official in Pengze, but he retired to the pastoral world because he was dissatisfied with the decay of the power at that time and was reluctant to lose dignity for money.

This example is about shift from adjectives to nouns. In this example, the shift method is applied, from an adjective to a noun. In art, the basic subject is not the producer, but the person at whom the work of art is aimed, that is, the appreciator; and the artist himself, as long as he treats his work as an art work (not as a product), will see your own works and judge your own works as an appreciator. However, the so-called “appreciator” is not a certain person or a specific individual, but everyone (Jan, 1977, p. 150). This requests the translated text to be readable and understood by every appreciator. The translation is very clear and concise after the method shift is adopted.

ST: 在一唱三叹的赠佩表爱中，这位猎手对妻子粗犷热烈的感情表现得淋漓酣畅。（闺则06，杂佩）

TT: As for the husband, he fully understood his wife’s virtues and wanted to send her the most valuable things in the world to repay her love. This poem fully displays the hunter’s love for his wife.



Figure 2. Jade Pendant.

This example is about shift from adjectives to adverbs (see Figure 2). The four-character phrase is beautiful in three ways: in meaning, form, and rhythm (Xu, 2003). From the perspective of rhythm, this phrase still involves four characters. However, the meaning contained is very simple and clear and is easily for the target reader to understand and accept. Only through reading practice can the significance and importance of the literary text show. The reason why literature becomes literature is that “readers are no less important than authors are” (Eagleton, 1958, p. 75). That is why the method shift is applied.

Shift at Syntactic Level

ST: 元德秀, 字紫芝, 唐朝河南(今洛阳)人祖居洛阳, 是唐代诗人元结的宗兄和老师, 为人宽厚。(棣华07, 紫芝眉宇)

TT: Yuan Dexiu, whose courtesy name was Zizhi, was born in Luoyang City of Henan Province in the Tang Dynasty. He was good at writing prose as well as verse and once wrote a famous Chinese essay to express his attitude toward life and the world. Meanwhile, he was the brother and teacher of Yuan Jie, a poet in the Tang Dynasty. He was admired by a number of people because of his virtues.

A dialogue with the past occurred when we are faced with an article. Giving and obtaining, questioning and answering are all contained in the openness to others, so as to seek understanding. Therefore, it can be described as “mediation between the past and the present, between you and me” (Jauss, 1987, p. 325). In this example, it is the mediation of the translator between the reader and the author of the original text. Through understanding, the horizon fusion can be attained. “Passive voice is used more often in the English language” (Li, 2016, p. 151). Therefore, the active voice is shifted into a passive voice here to ensure the prominence of the main character, and it is more in line with English language habits.

Shift at Semantic Level

ST: 十竹斋笺画图刻托盘餐具诸物, 写东汉梁鸿、孟光夫妻相互敬爱, 举案齐眉的故事。(闰则08, 举案)

TT: The painting engraves trays and tableware, which shows a couple named Liang Hong and Meng Guang in Eastern Han Dynasty. They respected and loved each other for their whole life.

This example is about shift from specific words to generalized words. When a literary work describes an object or its environment, it cannot be fully explained, and sometimes it does not indicate whether the object has a certain nature or not. Nothing especially the development of things and the fate of the characters can be fully certain through the description of language. “We cannot express the infinitely rich nature of an object through limited words” (Roman, 1973, pp. 19-20). The translation should not allow readers to pay “unnecessary processing efforts”, but if the readers gain more than they do put in effort, then this effort is worth it (Gutt, 2000, p. 148). The phrase in this case is a very representative idiom, describing a specific situation of the love between couples. However, it is very difficult to express the specific cultural information contained in the short text, which will not only cause the translation to be too long, but also input too much information to the reader at one time, which will also affect the reader’s acceptance of the translation. So, this method is applied.

ST: 当时有一百岁老翁说在他孩童时, 曾看见蓟子训在会稽市场上卖药, 相貌与现在一模一样。(寿征03, 铜狄)

TT: An elder at the age of 100 years old once said that he saw Ji selling medical herbs in the market when he was a child and that Ji's appearance remained unchanged.

This example is about shift from positive words to negative words (see Figure 3). In the translation of this phrase, the method shift has been applied. The positive Chinese phrase has been shifted into a negative one with the same meaning. Negative expression plays an important role. In this situation, it highlights the emotion of surprise, and increases the mystery of the article under the reader's existing horizon. At the same time, from the perspective of translation rhythm, it can also make expression catchier and more symmetrical.



Figure 3. Tong Di (copper figurine).

Conclusions

Iconology of the Decorated Writing-Paper of the Ten Bamboo Studio was published in April 2019. After publication, it has been widely praised and won many awards, such as the Excellent Art Book Award reported by Altron Art.com, *Yangtze Evening News*, and *People's Daily Online*. So far, Amazon has a total of five purchase records. Although the number is limited, they are all five-star praise, which shows the love of foreign readers. Therefore, it can be seen that this translation project has been well accepted.

As for the research method, the authors suggested that more research could be further done with the increasing number of the readers of the book. From the perspective of reception aesthetics, it would be more convincing to do the research about translation reception from the perspective of the readers. More research methods could be adopted. But of course, the book must be well spread first, so that more people could get to know and love the book.

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