

A Study on Defamiliarization in the Translation of *The Last Quarter of the Moon*

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The Last Quarter of the Moon is a novel written by Chi Zijian, which describes the life of the Ewenki ethnic minority in northeast China. The novel has received wide attention for its profound theme and unique narrative style. Defamiliarization is a technique commonly used in literary creation. By breaking the conventional expression mode and changing the conventional view, readers can have new feelings and understandings. The original text of *The Last Quarter of the Moon* describes the life of the Ewenki minority in China, which has a strong defamiliarization effect. In the English version, the translator adopts various methods to reproduce this defamiliarization. Through the analysis of its English translation, this paper discusses the defamiliarization embodied in it and the two translation methods used by the translator to reproduce the defamiliarization of the original text: alienizing translation and hybridization. It is found that the translation successfully retains the unique charm of the original text by means of language and cultural defamiliarization, enabling English readers to obtain a new reading experience, and revealing the important reasons why the English translation of *The Last Quarter of the Moon* can be successfully translated and spread in the Western world.

Keywords: *The Last Quarter of the Moon*, defamiliarization, alienizing translation, hybridization

Introduction

A Brief Introduction to *The Last Quarter of the Moon*

The Last Quarter of the Moon is a Chinese novel written by a very famous female writer Chi Zijian, which describes the living situation of the minority Ewenki people in Northeast China and this ethnic group's vicissitudes of several centuries. This novel has won the seventh Mao Dun Literature Prize in 2008, and was also selected into the "70 Chinese Classic Novels of the New China Over the Past 70 Years" on September 23, 2019, which proves that it has high literary value. On January 17, 2013, the English translation of *The Last Quarter of the Moon* by American sinologist Bruce Humes was published by Harvill Secker in the UK.

Chi Zijian, the author of the book, in the self-narrative tone of the wife of the last chief of the Ewenki people, shows readers the unique ethnic characteristics of the Ewenki people and their folk culture passed down from generation to generation. This novel reveals the impact and crisis faced by the Ewenki people in the process of modernization, as well as its 100-year history of ups and downs and its indomitable spirit. Widely praised by Western readers for its natural and fluent language, Bruce Humes' English translation has a great influence

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overseas, and has become the “original” of other translations, such as the Dutch and German versions of *The Last Quarter of the Moon*.

The reviews of foreign media and newspapers are a strong demonstration for its successful translation, such as the book review by Kelly Falconer, editor of *Asian Literature Review*, published by the *Financial Times* on January 18, 2013. Kelly said *The Last Quarter of the Moon* is a fitting tribute to the Ewenki people by a writer of rare talent. On 3 February 2013, the editor of the *Independent*, Daniel Hahn, described *The Last Quarter of the Moon* as a novel about life and the way of life, far removed from what we can imagine, and quite different from what British readers might expect from a Chinese novel. He thought that the novel’s language is concise and the tone is straightforward and authentic. It does not read like a translation or even fiction. Nicky Harman, a translator of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, spoke highly of the translator’s translation. “Bruce Humes has done a great job. The translation’s language is so natural, smooth and charming that I felt as if I were reading Chi Zijian’s own writing”, he commented.

Introduction to Defamiliarization

“Defamiliarization” is a concept put forward by Victor Shklovsky, which is a literary theory concept used to describe the formalist literature in Russia in the early 20th century. The so-called “defamiliarization” is to “make something strange”. If we trace it back, we can return to another important tradition of Western poetics—“novelty”. Aristotle believes that “novelty” is to make ordinary things unusual and strange, so that the style will not be dull and the reader can have a novel pleasure. Shklovsky believes that defamiliarization is a way to increase the difficulty of feeling and prolong the difficulty, the purpose of which is to reverse the accustomed feeling and make the familiar things unfamiliar.

Liu Miqing put forward that the basic attribute of translation is scientificity, followed by artistry (Liu, 2005). The pursuit of artistry in translation has paved the way for the application of defamiliarization theory in translation. Alienizing translation refers to a translation that violates the norms of translation in a particular period, especially the expectations of the target language readers, and the translator aims to create a dissociative effect by preserving the original method of the source text (Chen & Zhang, 2006). Irish poet Sydney proposed that translators pursue novel expressions, and the novelty of breaking the conventional language will often increase aesthetic pleasure and achieve the effect of defamiliarization (Heaney, 1988, p. 36). Chen Lin (2010) believed that alienizing translation needs to be further explored. She pointed out that alienization and hybridization are two methods of alienizing translation. According to Edwin Gentzler (2004), “The translation should retain the defamiliarization expression of the source text, and if the expression of the source text already exists in the second language, the translator should come up with a new expression” (p. 80). The above arguments advocate that translators should adopt alienizing techniques to highlight the differences between different languages and cultures. In this paper, we mainly focus on the defamiliarization that exists in the original text and is reproduced by the translator in the target text.

Alienizing Translation and Hybridization

The so-called “alienizing translation” refers to the translation, which preserves the linguistic and cultural differences of the source text. The objects of preservation include new vocabulary and syntax, foreign cultural images and concepts, and stylistic and narrative techniques that are not available in local culture. Some studies have pointed out that when translating foreign cultural content into the local language and culture, readers will experience a novel feeling that cannot be gotten in the native culture, and new concepts can be formed.

Chinese and Western cultures have much differences, so translators always encounter some situations in the process of translation that cannot be handled with “alienization”. The translation full of exotic flavors will greatly exceed the readers’ understanding scope, and will make readers lose interest in reading. Therefore, when cultural differences are too great to carry out “alienizing translation”, another way can be adopted to achieve defamiliarization is “hybridization”. The so-called “hybridization” refers to a translation method that seeks a compromise between the source language culture and the target language culture in order to preserve or reconstruct the defamiliarization of the source text.

There are a large number of Ewenki characteristic words in *The Last Quarter of the Moon*, such as personal names, place names, and other cultural related words. Bruce Humes has reproduced this kind of “defamiliarization” to the greatest extent in translation. In an interview, he said, “What I wanted to do was to reproduce the original’s emotion in another language, and to focus all my energy on how to depict the original story truthfully”. According to relevant studies, the use of foreignizing strategy in the whole translated text accounts for more than 70%, which also conforms to his own translation ideas (Jiao, 2022). Bruce Humes believes that the reason why a novel with national themes can have a great charm for Western readers is that the original author uses many exotic words and expressions, and it is these expressions that construct the ideal world in the author’s mind. Once the translation loses this kind of exotic flavor, it will lose its charm and become a plain work in the target language (Wang & Hu, 2015). Bruce Humes’ representation of “defamiliarization” in the original text caters to Western readers’ pursuit of “difference”, enhances readers’ sense of novelty and aesthetic pleasure in reading, and thus improves their reading experience.

Defamiliarization of Language

Language defamiliarization is an important technique in literary translation. In the English translation of *The Last Quarter of the Moon*, the translator retains the linguistic features of the original text by introducing some new expressions into the language of English. For example, the Ewenki proper nouns and some characteristic words in the original work are not simply spelled out in Chinese pinyin in the translation, but are properly transformed according to the pronunciation of Ewenki people, so that English readers can feel the linguistic charm of the original text when reading. The language defamiliarization of this novel is mainly embodied in the translation of proper nouns.

Proper nouns are fixed as unified statements of an ethnic group’s cognition to the outside world, showing the unique ethnic identity and their culture. *The Last Quarter of the Moon* involves a large number of personal names, place names, and other words that have ethnic characteristics. According to the previous research, the novel contains a total of 150 proper nouns, making the whole work very exotic (Zhu & Huang, 2017).

Although the proper nouns in the original text are written in Chinese, there are still essential differences between them and the real Chinese in terms of word collocation and combination, naming method and usage, etc. The Chinese readers who read the original text for the first time will be surprised by such names, indicating that the author consciously follows the style of the Ewenki group. This will inevitably widen the distance between Chinese readers and the original work, extend the readers’ aesthetic perception ability, and arouse their curiosity and interest points, thus making them produce “strangeness” or even “freshness” that has never been felt. Proper nouns are divided into people’s names, appellations, and place names in this paper.

People's Names

When dealing with people's names, Bruce Humes did not translate them into Chinese Pinyin for he believed that the translation would definitely lose its exotic flavor if he did this way. Instead, he traced these names' historical origin and classified them into four categories: the Ewenki names, the Russian names, the Chinese names, and the Japanese names.

After distinguishing Ewenki names from Russian names with the help of Ewenki residents, Bruce Humes took different steps to deal with them. For the Ewenki names, he asked the Ewenki people to pronounce them correctly, record the pronunciation with the International Phonetic Alphabet, and then choose the appropriate English letters to spell them respectively. In the case of “安道尔”, Bruce translated it into “Andaur” instead of “An Dao'er” to show respect for the Ewenki language. There are other examples like “妮浩”, “瓦罗加”, and “西班牙”, which are translated into “Nihau”, “Valodya”, and “Shiban” respectively. For names from Russia, he rendered them into real Russian names. For example, “伊万”, “柳莎”, and “果格力” were rendered into “Ivan”, “Lyusya”, and “Grigori” respectively. Also, for Chinese names, Bruce Humes followed the Chinese Pinyin; while for Japanese names, he used Romaji, which is the Roman alphabet used to spell Japanese.

Appellations

In Ewenki culture, they have their own nouns for appellations. For example, “额尼” means “mother” and “阿玛” means “father”. When dealing with the translation of appellations, Bruce Humes transliterates them and puts the translations in italics for emphasizing the particularity of unique appellations. For example, “额尼” is translated as “Eni”, “阿玛” is translated into “Ama”, and “额格都阿玛”, which means “uncle”, is translated into “Egdi'ama”.

Place Names

Similarly, as for those names of towns and villages which have close relations with the Russian or Manchu ethnic group, such as “珠尔干” and “卜奎”, Humes searched for their original pronunciation, and spelt them according to Russian or Manchu language. The main two methods he adopted were transliteration, for example, “珠尔干” was translated into “Jurgang”, and transliteration plus literal translation, like “克坡河” is translated as “Keppe River”. These two translation methods help trace the historical origin of the Ewenki in an authentic and accurate way, and highlight the uniqueness of Ewenki geographical features. Bruce once explained the reason why he kept the foreignness in the translation of place names, “The readers are roaming in the Ewenki world while reading, so it is of great necessity to keep the Ewenki pronunciation of place names” (Wang & Hu, 2015, p. 94).

All in all, the translator's purpose is to make the readers of the target language feel the charm of the foreign culture, to subtly transfer the “strangeness” generated by the readers of the original text to the readers of the target language, so that they can feel the literary value and aesthetic taste of the translated literature, and at the same time get closer to the original text and the culture of the source language.

Defamiliarization of Culture

The Last Quarter of the Moon contains rich cultural knowledge and historical background of Northeast China, which may be unfamiliar to English readers. In order to help readers better understand the cultural connotation of the novel, the translator adopts the method of hybridization, which is not complete alienation, but to add explanatory content to facilitate readers' understanding, and explain some words and expressions with

specific cultural meanings. Hybridization is always achieved by the method of transliteration plus addition. These explanations not only help bridge the cultural gap, but also enable English readers to gain a deeper understanding of the history and culture of Northeast China. Through these explanations, the translation successfully achieves cultural defamiliarization, enabling English readers to better understand and feel the cultural connotations of the novel in the process of reading.

Culture-loaded words are the words with ethnic characteristics, and they are also the part of a language system that can most directly and sensitively reflect an ethnic group's history, culture, and social customs. Such words not only carry rich cultural connotations, but also "exist only in one culture and are blank in other cultures". It is because of this characteristic that they often become barriers to cross-cultural communication and translation. And it is precisely these culture-loaded words that can best reflect the degree of the translator's representation of the defamiliarization of the original text.

Cultural Images

Cultural image is the symbol of history and culture, which contains the wisdom and strength of working people. Every nation has its own cultural symbols, which record the historical track of life and production of its people. Cultural image is a cultural inheritance and a nation's exclusive memory. *The Last Quarter of the Moon* contains a lot of cultural images that are related to Ewenki ethnic group and are not familiar to the other people, such as "靠老宝", "希楞柱", "乌鲁木苦得", and so on.

The English version retains the characteristics of the original, so as to show the culture of the Chinese nation to Western readers. Humes mainly adopted the literal translation method, for example, "三角棚" is translated as "triangular shelter", or transliteration plus addition, which can preserve the exotic charm of the Ewenki images, and at the same time, the explanatory information also gives readers a clearer understanding of what kind of thing it is. For example, "靠老宝" is translated as "*Kalbo*", which is a kind of forest warehouse that can hold daily necessities. Humes transliterated this word and put the translation in italics in order to emphasize the particularity of culture-loaded words. "乌鲁木苦得" is translated into "*Ulumktu*, a flintlock rifle that fired small bullets", in which the additional content can help foreign readers clearly understand what this cultural image is.

Cultural Traditions

Generally speaking, "customs are behavioral patterns or norms observed by generations of people in a specific social or cultural region". Cultural tradition refers to the common norms of behavior followed by people living in the same ethnic area. *The Last Quarter of the Moon* shows the readers a refreshing new wedding and burial customs of the Ewenki cultural tradition, bringing readers a different reading experience.

There are many representative wedding and burial customs in the original text. For example, "那个时候死去的人, 都是风葬的" introduces the unique burial custom of Ewenki people, and it is translated into "People who died back then all underwent wind-burial". The unique Ewenki custom of wind burial is the product of the mysterious integration of the Ewenki people with nature, forming a unique local spiritual and cultural heritage, and also bearing the Ewenki people's prayers for good weather and longing for a better life in the future. The early Ewenki people all adopted wind burial. Chi Zijian presents the Ewenki's funeral ceremony to the readers one by one, which reflects Chi Zijian's thinking on life and death. However, this particular funeral ceremony is undoubtedly very strange to foreign readers. Therefore, they will have a strong interest in this mysterious cultural custom, which is also the charm of the novel. When dealing with this information, Humes adopted literal

translation, which completely reproduces the strangeness of the original text.

“她说尼都萨满在林克的哥哥，按照我们氏族的习俗，弟弟去世后，哥哥是不能娶弟媳为妻的；但如果是哥哥死去了，弟弟可以娶兄嫂为妻”。This sentence introduces the Ewenki people's wedding custom and is translated into “*Nidu the shaman* is Linke's elder brother. According to our clan's customs, if your elder brother dies, you can take his widow as your wife. But an elder brother cannot marry the widow of his younger brother”. Compared with the Han culture, the Ewenki people have a unique wedding custom for the Ewenki allow marriages between relatives. The different wedding practices from the Han people also reflect the differences in the treatment of customs among various ethnic groups in China, and it is also the demonstration of the diversified cultural traditions. This will bring a certain cultural impact to readers who are not familiar with Ewenki culture, and at the same time improve readers' understanding and perception of strange things, so as to achieve the effect of defamiliarization.

Other Culture-Loaded Words

“他不仅同意儿子来我们乌力愣‘入赘’，而且我们成亲的那天，他还亲自带着一行人，把拉吉达送来”。This sentence introduced “入赘” and is translated into “He not only agreed that his son could *ruzhui*—marry into the wife's *urireng*—but on wedding day he led an entourage to formally deliver Lajiede to us”.

There are a large number of culture-loaded words and expressions with Chinese characteristics in *The Last Quarter of the Moon*. The translation of these terms should be based on Chinese culture as much as possible and retain the cultural images of the source language. The translator translates “入赘” as “*ru zhui*—marry into the wife's *urireng*”. “入赘” is a unique expression in China. But there is no such custom in Western countries, resulting in foreign readers not understanding this information. Therefore, the English version chooses to avoid literal translation and retain the Chinese pronunciation. In this translation, transliteration is carried out first, and then concise language is used to explain. This method not only retains the traditional cultural expression of the Ewenki, but also increases the credibility of the work, so that readers have a better understanding of Ewenki culture.

“他的祖父当年是扎兰屯一个有名的大地主，家里有很多房屋和土地，养了很多长工。土地改革斗争地主的时候，他的祖父上吊了”。In this sentence, “地主”，“长工”，and “土地改革” are culture-loaded words which appeared in the agrarian revolution of our country. It is translated into “Back then my grandfather was a well-known landlord in Jalanner, His family owned many houses and lots of land, and employed many long-term hired hands. During the land reform when they held struggle session against land reform, Grandfather hanged himself”.

Landlords were once regarded as an exploiting class, meaning a group of people who exploited the peasants. In history, there was a period of “fighting landlords”, which referred to the agrarian revolution and reform struggle under the leadership of the Communist Party. It was easier to understand the translation of “地主” as landlords, and the essence of “fighting landlords” was a “struggle”. Therefore, translating it as “struggle session” allows foreign readers to understand the essence of the movement in a short time; “长工” refers to farmers who have a long-term contract with the landlord. They are exploited and oppressed by the landlord. This concept is quite unfamiliar to foreign readers, so the translator adopts free translation and translates it into “long-term hired hands”.

Conclusion

The Last Quarter of the Moon is a work with profound connotation and unique charm, and the success of its

English translation provides us with valuable experience. The analysis of defamiliarization in its English version shows that by means of language defamiliarization and cultural defamiliarization, the translator successfully retains the unique charm and connotation of the original text, enabling English readers to obtain a new reading experience, and arousing their strong interest in Chinese culture and history. This not only helps to spread Chinese culture, but also promotes communication and understanding between different cultures. This inspires us to be brave enough to break the conventions and try new ways of expression in literary creation and translation. Only by constantly innovating and trying can we create more works with unique charm and connotation.

In the future literary translation, we should continue to pay attention to and study the application of defamiliarization techniques and other literary techniques in order to better retain the unique charm and connotation of the original text. At the same time, we also need to pay attention to the latest development of technology, and use digital and multimedia methods to innovate the presentation of literary translation. Through continuous exploration and innovation, we can promote the development of literary translation and make greater contributions to cross-cultural communication and the diversity of world cultures.

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