

An Analysis of In-text Thick Translation Strategies in the English Translation of *The Three-body Problem*

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Abstract: *The Three-body Problem*, as one of several renowned Chinese fictions abroad, was successfully translated by American famous sci-fi novelist Ken Liu. He flexible takes great advantage of thick translation strategies, which can be served as a way of successful application in translating Chinese popular novels. This paper is to try to find out the major forms of thick translation strategies in Ken Liu's English translation, and then illustrates diverse forms of in-text thick translation employed to transfer Chinese cultural messages and provide a useful guidance for translating Chinese non-mainstream literary works.

Keywords: In-text Thick Translation Strategies; Ken Liu; English Translation of *The Three-body Problem*

1. Introduction

Thick translation, is also known as deep translation or rich translation. According to K.A.Appiah, he reckons that thick translation refers to the placement of target texts in rich source languages and cultural contexts by adding auxiliary information such as explanations or annotations in the translations. (Appiah, 1993: 817) Since he put forward this concept, scholars at home and abroad have studied it in terms of different angles, some of which classify thick translation into two forms: in-text thick translation and out-of-text thick translation.

In-text thick translation is referred to as the thick translation that appears in the text of the translated version, generally deployed in several common ways, such as in-text explanations, annotations with parentheses or dashes, footnotes, double-line notes, post-paragraph commentaries, endnotes, etc. In contrast, out-of-text thick translation is the materials beyond the content of the translation, including the dedication, preface, introduction, postscript, index, glossary, list of characters, illustration, appendix, references, recommendations of the back cover, book reviews, and so on. Currently, only very few scholars have studied the translation of *The Three-body Problem* on the basis of thick translation. The writer mainly intends to explore the secrets of Ken Liu's great success in translating *The Three-body Problem* from the textual level, concentrating on the analysis of in-text thick translation strategies adopted by the translator.

2. In-text Thick Translation of the English Version of *The Three-body Problem*

The thick translation in the translated text is generally realized by adding notes or adding explanations (i.e. annotated translation) to the translation, which is characterized by in-text thick translation, and also its most direct manifestation. Liu Cixin excels at integrating neoclassicism into his science fictions, combining Chinese historical and cultural background with local customs with Chinese regional characteristics, which makes stories narrated with a strong Chinese style, a style completely different from that of contemporary western science fictions. *The Three-body Problem* is regarded as a typical example. Therefore, it is the priority for the translator Ken Liu to think about how to reproduce oriental elements of the original, better retain a large amount of Chinese cultural information, and make it a hard sci-fi novel with Chinese exotic customs, thus attracting foreign sci-fi readers and bridging Chinese-western culture. The translator deepens TL readers' understanding of Chinese native culture and enhances their interest by diverse methods such as employing footnotes, additions, as well as annotations with dashes in the target text.

2.1 In-text Annotations

In translation circles, direct interpretation or explanation is employed to translate culture-loaded content with rich information to make TL readers understand connotations of SL texts more directly and efficiently, meanwhile it can ensure the smooth reading comprehension and become less academic with fewer annotations in the TL text, so that non-Chinese readers can enjoy reading process more fluently and happily. This kind of means is more adopted and accepted by the translator, and well received and loved by target readers, especially in translating popular literary works. Under the guidance of thick translation theory, the translator Ken Liu uses conventional translation methods (e.g. literal translation, transliteration, literal translation plus annotation, transliteration plus annotation and free translation), to present the content of the original in the form of in-text annotations, especially interpreting culture-loaded words and providing non-Chinese readers background information as much as possible. Thus, it can help foreign readers understand cultural words of Chinese characteristics, and can let western audience respect Chinese culture. This kind of new combination can not only arouse readers' attention to Chinese culture, but also ensure reading not to be disturbed.

Ex. 1:

ST: Qiangbi bei yitiaotiao zongse de shupi fugaizhe, sanzhi dengzi shi gupu de shuzhuang, xiezitai yeshi you sange jiaoda de shuzhuang pingcheng de, haiyou nazhang chuang, pude xianrang shi dongbei de wulacao. (Liu Cixin, 2014: 51)

TT: And then there was the bed, apparently lined with ura sedge from Northeast China, which the locals stuffed into their shoes to stay warm in the cold climate. (Ken Liu, 2016:122)

In the source text, there is only one qualifier "Northeast" to modify "Wula grass", which briefly explains to SL readers that this is a unique plant in Northeast China, a monocotyledonous plant of the genus *Alpinia*, mainly growing in the Changbai Mountains in Northeast China and the South of Xing'an Mountains. In the TL text, the translator consciously adds the information of this exclusive plant inside it, and adopts a non-restrictive attributive clause "which the locals stuffed into their shoes to stay warm in the cold climate" to explain the usage of Wula grass to avoid possible misunderstandings while reading. Although annotations added herein has little effect on the development of the story, it shows that the translator is fully aware of differences between Chinese and Western cultures and expects to remain more exotic colors of the novel.

Ex. 2:

ST: Zai chubu xuanding le jige jianzhandian hou, ketizu zai yige dabufen minwu doushi yaodong de cunzhuangping tingliu xiuzheng. (Liu Cixin, 2014: 229).

TT: After selecting a few possible sites, the task force stayed for a brief rest at a village where most of the inhabitants still lived in traditional cave dwellings. (Ken Liu, 2016: 330)

In the sentence, some pieces of messages are usually needed to explain the Chinese word "yaodong". Nevertheless, the translator Ken Liu only uses the method of annotation to translate it, which does not negate his efforts to increase the understanding of English-speaking readers. From the English translation, it can be seen that the translator Ken Liu chooses a different way by adding two English words --"still" and "traditional", to inform TL readers that caves are unique but often neglected houses in China, and that because of economic development, few people has already lived there, instead of literal translation. For TL readers, the added word "traditional" can eliminate foreign readers' doubts that Chinese live in caves, because they may deem only primitive men do.

Ex. 3:

ST: Buzhibujue zhong, ta yi qidao le xin luocheng de CCTV dasha jiaoxia. (Liu Cixin, 2014: 19)

TT: Without realizing it, he found himself at the foot of the newly completed China Central Television building (Ken Liu, 2016: 76)

In the West, CCTV is the abbreviation of "Closed Circuit Television", referring to closed circuit television, while in China CCTV is the short form of China Central Television (CCTV), whose English full name is China Central Television. Obviously, the translator Ken Liu realizes that the acronym "CCTV" has different meanings in Chinese and Western cultures and the possible confusion it may bring, so he adopts the full name "China Central Television" of this word in the Chinese context to translate "CCTV" of "CCTV dasha" in the original. This method of interpretation through in-text annotation has become one of the most effective ways for translators to coordinate the differentiation

between Chinese and Western cultures.

2.2 Footnotes

The social culture of a country is largely reflected by its language. Any language has its unique attributes and bears its own special cultural connotations. During translating, since contradictions between different forms of languages, and balance inherent contradictions between two cultures and disagreement between languages and cultures should be coped with, translators often employ methods like in-text explanations or annotations. *The Three-body Problem* has a great many knowledge loaded with Chinese history and culture, which foreign readers are unfamiliar with, mainly involving China's social background, history, culture, and customs, etc. 42 footnotes with which the translator explains Chinese-culture-loaded information to non-Chinese readers in the original as principal modes are included in the English translation, for the purpose of better helping western readers to read the novel and ensuring smooth reading to maximize the popularity of Chinese native culture. The author will adopt examples for demonstration and illustration.

Ex. 4:

ST: Naming gongchengshi wen: “ta zheren shibushi you shenme xinlizhangai, yaobu zenme hui conglai bushang meiti ne? Biexiang shi Qian Zhongshu side, daosi dajia ye meineng zai dianshi shang kanshang yiyuan.”(Liu Cixin, 2008: 7)

TT: The young engineer asked, “Does she have some psychological issue? Why else wouldn't she agree to be interviewed by the media? Maybe she's like Qian Zhongshu, who died without ever appearing on TV.”(Ken Liu, 2014: 59)

Translator's Note: Qian Zhongshu(1910—1998) was one of the most famous Chinese literary scholars of the twentieth century. Erudite, witty, and aloof, he consistently refused media appearances. One might think of him as a Chinese Thomas Pynchon. (Ken Liu, 2014: 59)

In Example 4, the author of the original Liu Cixin simply takes Qian Zhongshu as an example to show how a scientist keeps a low profile. However, how to translate the analogy in the original may become difficult for the translator, because he is confronted with two choices: to use fuzzy words like "a scientist" to translate it, or to choose a footnote to render foreign readers a brief introduction to Qian Zhongshu. In the English translation, the translator Ken Liu not only briefly introduces Qian Zhongshu's identity and character, but also compares him to Thomas Pynchon of China. Thomas Pynchon is a famous American postmodernist writer who has refused to show up in the media for many years. The thick translation strategy can better resonate with TL readers and make the translation and the original closer to them.

Ex. 5:

ST: “Zheshi zhanguoshidai, woshi Zhouwenwang.” Naren shuo. “Zhouwenwang bushi zhanguoshidai de ren de?” Wang Miao wen. (Liu Cixin, 2008: 38)

TT: “This is the Warring States Period, ”the man with the trunk on his back said. “I am King Wen of Zhou.” (Ken Liu, 2014: 95)

Translator's Note: The Warring States Period lasted from 475 BC to 221 BC. But King Wen of Zhou reigned much earlier, from 1099 BC to 1050 BC. He is considered the founder of the Zhou Dynasty, which overthrew the corrupt Shang Dynasty. (Ken Liu, 2014: 95)

The Three-body Problem contains a large number of Chinese historical terms, which is a great challenge for translators. Apart from “Warring States Period (zhanguoshidai)” and “King Wen of Zhou (Zhouwenwang)”, there are still lots of Chinese culturally-loaded terminology such as “King Zhou”, “Chao Ge (Chao ge)”, “Fuxi” and “Mozi” -- fictional game characters in three-body games. When dealing with these terms, the translator Ken Liu chooses to literally translate these words into the target language first, continue to add footnotes correspondingly, and then give a brief idea of important historical events mentioned in the SL text ultimately. In this process, the translator increases TL readers' basic knowledge regarding Chinese history, which can expand readers base and provide foreign audience with opportunities to understand China's long history with the aim to make them better understand what the novel is all about. For such a method as thick translation, footnotes or endnotes are generally deployed to offer additional information, placing TL readers in a context similar to that for SL readers and obtaining homologous responses. By labeling footnotes in the TL text, the

translator enables to aid non-Chinese readers to consult relevant notes whenever, as well as provide them with more background knowledge to better appreciate the SL one.

Ex. 6:

ST: “Erjin baodu, yiping erguotou!” Dashi handao, tou ye butai, xianran dui zheer henshu le. (Liu Cixin, 2014: 94)

TT: “Two orders of quick-fried tripe, and a bottle of er guo tou!” Da Shi shouted, without even looking up. (Ken Liu, 2016:141)

Translator’s note: Er guo tou is a distilled liquor made from sorghum, sometimes called “Chinese vodka”. (Ken Liu, 2016:141)

Example 6 indicates that the translator Ken Liu strictly follows the principles of thick translation in the whole English version. In the original, it is merely casual conversation spoken by Da Shi, but in the TL text, the translator specially appends footnotes to explicate that er guo tou is a unique type of Chinese liquor. That is because Ken Liu may deems that it is an excellent chance to introduce Chinese culture by first transliterating “erguotou” into "er guo tou" and then analogizing it as “Chinese vodka” owing to the fact that vodka is well known to western readers, so that TL audience are able to associate er guo tou with vodka in the west and improve their understanding of Chinese wine culture.

3. Conclusion

The Three-body Problem has been thoroughly translated into English by Ken Liu, through making full use of varied thick translation strategies. To a great extent, he spares no effort to retain and interpret abundant Chinese culture-loaded messages included in the SL text in the translating process, which demonstrates K.A.Appiah’s proposal that translated texts are placed in rich source languages and cultural contexts by the employment of thick translation and shows that the translator tolerates and respects the original text and other-self cultures. Ken Liu attempts alternately to use various in-text thick translation strategies as shown this paper to enhance the cultural and symbolic capital of *The Three-body Problem* in the English world, making non-mainstream literary works like this science fiction well received abroad, and respected by western ordinary readers who pay more attention to Chinese culture. The development and comprehensive application of Ken Liu translation strategies will be conducive to the improvement of translation quality of Chinese literary works, in particular non-mainstream literature as translation and introduction impacts will be improved greatly and Chinese literature strategy "Going Global" will be assisted further, which has important significance for reference. In a nutshell, Ken Liu's English translation of *The Three-body Problem* can be considered as an epitome that thick translation is successfully applied to Chinese non-mainstream literary works.

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