

An Analysis of the Translation Strategies of the Culture - Loaded Words in Desert Rites

Yunhao Pan

School of Foreign Languages, Hubei University, Wuhan 430062, China

Abstract: The novel *Desert Rites* is a representative work by the famous Chinese writer Xuemo. The novel tells the story of a rural Chinese family and includes many culture-loaded words. Those culture-loaded words contain rich vernacular cultural elements that are difficult to translate, which poses a major challenge to the translator's translation ability. This analysis takes the culture-loaded words as the research object, studies the translation strategies adopted by translators, and analyses the influence of these translation strategies on the accuracy and loyalty of the translated work. The analysis finds that, when necessary, the translator needs to further explain the culture-loaded words to ensure that the readers can accurately understand the translated work.

Keywords: *Desert Rites*; Culture-Loaded Words; Translation Studies; Vernacular Language

1. Introduction

The novel *Desert Rites* is one of the most representative works of the famous writer Xuemo. As the first of the “Desert Trilogy”, *Desert Rites* is an outstanding realistic literary work with strong elements of western Chinese literature. The novel is set in the Hexi Corridor, and records the story of Laoshun's family of six struggling against their fates on the barren desert land.

Xuemo, the author of *Desert Rites*, was born in Liangzhou region in 1963. After graduating from college, Xuemo worked as a teacher and engaged in literary creation in his spare time. In the creation of the novel, in order to present the customs of his hometown in an authentic way, Xuemo used a large number of culture-loaded words in Liangzhou dialect. In the face of these regional vernacular, it requires the translator to use appropriate translation strategies to interpret the information in the original text. Howard Goldblatt, one of the translators of this novel, once mentioned in an interview that expressing the vernacular cultural information in English without losing the original flavor of the source text was the biggest challenge in the translation process^[1]. The purpose of the study is to explore how the translators can correctly use translation strategies in translating the vernacular language, so that the translation not only retains the cultural characteristics of the source text, but also allows readers to have an accurate understanding of the translated work.

2. Literature Review

The English translation of the novel *Desert Rites* was jointly translated by the prominent American sinologist Howard Goldblatt and his wife Sylvia Li-Chun Lin, and was published in September 2018. Since the introduction of the English translation, research on the English translation of the novel has increased continuously. In the CNKI database, 13 relevant studies on the English translation can be found. These studies are focused on the translation of the dialects and folk songs from various perspectives including the linguistic adaption theory and translation behavior criticism^[2-4]. In overseas journals, as Xuemo's previous works have rarely been translated, no relevant research literature can be found in the Web of Science database. With the publication of the Goldblatt and Lin's translation, it is believed that more Chinese and overseas scholars will conduct more in-depth research on this novel and its author.

As an increasing number of Chinese literary works have been translated into different languages and are introduced to

the global publishing market in recent years, it is not uncommon to study the translation strategies of culture-loaded words in Chinese literary works. Culture-loaded words refer to words and phrases or idioms with exclusive meanings in a certain language. And in most cases, there is no corresponding word in the target language for culture-loaded words. These words may contain unique features or customs of a certain region, or concepts exclusive to the vernacular culture. As there are no corresponding words in the target language, it is very demanding for the translator to adopt proper translation strategies. Since the 90s, scholars in China have paid close attention to the culture-loaded words in translation and the translation strategies, and have done a lot of research on this front. These studies not only resulted in positive effects on the promotion of Chinese literary works, but also helped overseas readers better understand the Chinese culture.

3. Analysis of the English Translation of Culture-loaded Words in *Desert Rites*

As a realistic portrait of the rural lives in Liangzhou, the vernacular culture is vividly preserved in the novel, and the dialogues contain a large number of words from the Liangzhou dialect. The translators must utilize various translation strategies to bridge the vocabulary vacancies in translation. According to the comparative reading of the source text and the target text, it can be found that there are mainly three translation strategies adopted by the translators: the first is foreignization that retains the cultural characteristics of the source language, the second is domestication which means the translators try to replace the source text with similar objects that are familiar to the English readers, and the last is retaining the original pronunciation of the source word, and explain the meaning as a kind of compensation in the translation.

Domestication and foreignization are commonly used translation strategies. This theory was put forward by American translator Lawrence Venuti in his book *The Translator's Invisibility* in 1995. Venuti believes that domestication is bringing the authors into the culture of the target language, while foreignization is accepting the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign language text and sending the readers into the culture of the source language^[5]. The strategies of domestication and foreignization not only affect the literal expression, but also go deep into the cultural level, reflecting the translator's value orientation of choosing and balancing between two different cultures. When translating *Desert Rites*, a literary work full of traditional Chinese cultural elements and vernacular language with strong regional characteristics, the two translators inevitably had to choose between domestication and foreignization strategies.

Example 1:

瞎仙说啥来着，一树梨花压海棠呀.....就怕你老骚胡把头磕烂呀。(p.8)

What does the blind storyteller say? "An old pear tree can mount a fresh begonia, but nothing will come out of it." (p.10)

"一树梨花压海棠" in the source text is from a poem by Su Shi, a renowned poet from the Northern Song Dynasty. The original verse "鸳鸯被里成双夜，一树梨花压海棠" by Su refers to the marriage between older men and younger women, and has a derogatory meaning. Here the author chose to directly translate the original text without explaining the cultural background. Although this translation strategy fully retains the language characteristics of the source text, it is not easy for Western readers to understand its meaning. The verse depicts a May-to-December romance in a rather obscure way, as the pear tree refers to the older man due to its resemblance of the senior's grey hair, and the begonia refers to the young woman for its fresh red color. The translators chose to adopt the foreignization method, which can indeed retain the linguistic characteristics of the source language, but with further explanation of the verse, it will be easier for readers to understand the translation.

Example 2:

莹儿笑道：“我还以为你是个马大哈呢，谁知你肚子里鼓点多得很。”(p.271)

"I thought you were the happy-go-lucky type. I never saw you as a schemer." (p.387)

Since the source text contains a great number of colloquial words, and most of these words do not have the exact corresponding substitutes in the target language, the translation of these words requires the translators to choose the appropriate words in English according to their understanding of the source text. According to the *Longman Advanced*

Dictionary of Contemporary English, “happy-go-lucky” means enjoying life and not worrying about things. However, according to the *Dictionary of Modern Chinese* (现代汉语词典), “马大哈” refers to a frivolous and careless person. At first glance, the two words seem to correspond, but it is not hard to see that the two words have different meanings. Happy-go-lucky indicates that the person is an optimist and has no worries, while “马大哈” indicates that the person is careless. The meanings expressed by the two words are clearly different. As a result, such domestication leads to distortion from the source text, and the reason for such distortion can be attributed to the translator's inaccurate understanding of the source text.

Example 3:

以前清汤灌老子，可高兴得唱秦腔。(p.29)

In the old days, I'd be so happy I'd be singing opera if you gave me a bowl of water soup (p.42).

Comparing the source text and the target text, several differences can be found. First of all, to translate the word “秦腔”(Qinqiang), the translator adopted the domestication strategy. The word refers to a traditional folk art in Northwest China. It is generally translated as Shaanxi opera in English. There are significant differences between *Qinqiang* and opera. It is that *Qinqiang* serves as a grass-root entertainment for the mass public, while in the West, opera singing requires special vocal training, which is much more demanding and professional. And the translation here does not quite fit the protagonist's image as an illiterate farmer. The dialogues contain a large number of myths and legends. If no further explanation is given, it will be difficult for western readers who are not quite familiar with Chinese traditions to understand the full meaning behind the words. Therefore, it is not difficult to see that explanations are essential to bridge the gap between cultures.

Example 4:

兔鹰来的时候，是白露前后。(p.1)

The rabbit-hawks come in late summer, around the time of Bailu, or White Dew (p.1)

“Bailu” is one of the traditional Chinese twenty-four solar terms. The twenty-four solar terms are the festivals that celebrate the changing seasons in the traditional lunisolar calendar, which are determined according to the position of the sun. Under the current Gregorian calendar system, the time of Bailu is at the end of August and the beginning of September, which is what the translators refer to as the late summer. This sentence is the first sentence of the novel, and the author depicts a desolate picture of the desert with just a few simple words. When translating the word, the translators adopted the strategy of foreignization in order to preserve the cultural characteristics of the source language, and then further explained it to help the readers understand its meaning. This approach not only allows the readers to fully understand the translated text, but also properly retains the cultural characteristics of the source text. The translation strategies adopted by the translator here perfectly maintain the balance of information between the target and the source texts.

4. Conclusion

The analysis finds the English translation of *Desert Rites* by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-Chun Lin a successful one. The translation reflects the valuable experience accumulated by the two translators in their years of literary translation practice. The analysis finds that, faced with a large number of culture-loaded words, the translators not only retained the language characteristics of the source language, but also ensured that target language readers can clearly understand the connotation of these vernacular words and expressions. The translators adopted translation strategies including foreignization, domestication and compensation to restore the vocabulary vacancies and gaps between cultures. Although it is generally a successful translation practice, there are still a few inaccurate translations of culture-loaded words in the translated work. The inaccurate translations of those words are mainly due to the fact that the two translators are not familiar enough with the vernacular culture of Northwest China. The analysis also finds that these minor mistakes are immaterial to the overall accuracy of the translation.

References

[1] Lv, M. Research on the Narrative Translation of Howard Goldblatt. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press; 2011.

[2] Fei, X., Ma, Q. Research on the English Translation of "Hua'er" in *Desert Rites* from the Perspective of Translation Aesthetics. *Cultural Journal*. 2021; 04: 61-64.

[3] Zou, L., Ge, L. Discussion on the Translation of Metaphors in *Desert Rites* from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory. *Cultural Journal*. 2020; 04: 175-178.

[4] Wang, Y., Wang, Y. Translator Behaviour Criticism on English translation of Vernacular Language in *Desert Rites*. *Journal of Hezhou University*. 2021;37(03): 112-117, 136.

[5] Venuti, L. *The Translator's Invisibility*. New York: Routledge; 1995.