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## An Eco-Translatological Perspective to Folk Culture Translation: A Case Study of *To Live* Translated by Michael Berry

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### Abstract

This paper aims to explore the translation of Chinese folk cultural elements from an eco-translatological perspective. Through the analysis of Berry's translation of folk cultural elements in the novel *To Live*, it can be concluded that the translator's selection in the translation properly adapts to the translational eco-environment from linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions, and also it proves that the emerging eco-translatology theory is applicable and significant to folk culture translation.

**Key words:** *To Live*; Eco-translatology; Folk culture; Translation

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### INTRODUCTION

Folk culture, as a kind of cultural phenomenon that reflects specific society and life, has characteristics different from other cultural phenomena: Folk culture is of traditional reserves. To a great extent, it is the result of practice, which comes into being not from books or regular education, but through unconscious seeing and

hearing, personal experience, observation and imitation. The words or expressions existing in a specific social setting carry specific national cultural message and deep cultural connotations. As a mirror of the social reality, literary works tend to contain numerous folk cultures. How to keep successfully the folk culture in translation is always a major task that translators are facing with.

Yu Hua is one of the best authors who enjoy a high reputation in China and abroad in the contemporary literary world. His work *To Live*, which contains rich Chinese folk cultural elements, has caused a great sensation in China. American Sinologist Michael Berry has sufficient bilingual and bicultural competence. He translated *To Live* in an effort to bridge the cultural gap between China and America, and make American people know more about contemporary Chinese culture. So the translation was made in the spirit of respecting and admiring Chinese culture. The English version of *To Live* was published in 2003 by Random House and has been receiving great praises from foreign readers.

At present, the research on the original text of this novel has been comparatively numerous, but few people have studied Michael Berry's English translation of *To Live*, especially the folk cultural elements with distinct Chinese characteristics. Thus, based on the eco-translatological theory, this paper aims to discuss the way the translator interprets Chinese folk culture, clarify Berry's adaptation and selection strategies in translating folk cultural elements from three dimensions, namely, linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions, and also try to prove that the emerging eco-translatology theory is applicable and significant to the translation of folk culture.

### 1. ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY

Chinese linguist Hu (2004) firstly summarized and developed the theory of "adaptive translation", and put

forward the translation theory of “eco-translatology” in line with the global ecological ideological trend and academic development. In recent years, as an interdisciplinary approach to translation studies, this emerging theory has integrated ecology and translation as an extension of translation theory and has provided new vitality and perspectives for translation studies.

Eco-translatology was proposed under the guidance of Darwin’s theory of evolution and values translation in terms of eco-environment, translator centeredness, translator’s adaptation and selection from the perspective of language, culture and communication. It probes into the translation process, translation principles, translation methods and evaluation criteria. The translation process refers to translator’s adaptation and selection in translational eco-environment. Translation principles mean multi-dimensional selective adaptation and adaptive selection. Translation methods are three-dimensional transformations at the linguistic, cultural and communicative levels. Evaluation criterion can be interpreted as readers’ feedback and translators’ quality.

As for translation, if its principle is to provide macro guidance, its methods are then to be used in micro operation. According to Hu’s (2004, p.220) point of view, “the translation method from the eco-translatological perspective can be considered as ‘multi-dimensional’ transformation, but mainly focuses on three-dimensional transformations, namely linguistic, cultural and communicative transformation”. In terms of translation as textual transplant, it principally concerns the textual transplant in eco-environment of linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions for source language and target language. Therefore, the translation methods of eco-translatology can be briefly and comprehensively described as “three dimensional transformations” in language, culture and communication. As a matter of course, the translator makes adaptive selection in these three dimensions. Hu (2013, p.237) also stressed that:

For the ease of highlighting certain dimension, it doesn’t mean the other dimensions and elements do not play a part. As a matter of fact, in certain translating process, the elements of language, culture, and communication are often interactive and hard to separate.

It is obvious that eco-translatology is a brand new translation theory whose concept broadens the vision of translation studies. From the perspective of ecology, eco-translatology focuses on the process of adaption and selection, relationship between the translational eco-environment and the translator. Meanwhile, three-dimensional transformation as the translation method is taken as an indispensable factor in translation activities. All in all, “survival of the fittest” is the key point of eco-translatology. In addition, as translation process is dynamic, text types are changing all the time, so the priority of the three dimensions is not stable and it varies according to the text types (Hu, 2004b, p.147).

## 2. A THREE-DIMENSIONAL STUDY ON THE TRANSLATION OF FOLK CULTURE IN *TO LIVE*

In this part, by using some specified examples taken from the translation of *To Live*, the author intends to explore how the translator made the adaptation and selection from linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions, and thus how the folk culture was successfully retained in the translation.

### 2.1 Adaptation and Selection From the Linguistic Dimension

According to Hu (2008a), the adaptive selection of linguistic dimension refers to translator’s transformation and selection towards linguistic form in different aspects and levels to achieve the best adaptation and optimization. Translation, in nature, is the transformation of languages. Chinese differs from English in lots of respects since they belong to different language families—Sino-Tibetan language family and Indo-European language family. Adaptive transformation from linguistic dimension means that translator adapts and selects linguistic forms from different layers and different perspectives. Linguistic form can be analyzed at the lexical level, syntactical level and textual level. When translating, the translator is supposed to pay attention not only to the language and ideology of source text, but also the target readers’ acceptability and understanding. Because language is the carrier of culture, the good grasp of language is essential to the success of translation. Here in after, “ST” is the short terms of “source text” and “TT” means “target text”. The following are some examples taken from ST and TT for analyzing translator’s adaptive selection in linguistic level.

- (1) ST1: 福贵的讲述到这里中断, 我发现我们都坐在阳光下了, 阳光的移动使树荫悄悄离开我们, 转到了另一边. (Yu, 2010, p.67)

TT1: Fugui’s narration stopped here. I realized we were both sitting right in the sun. The changing path of the sunlight had caused the shadow of the tree to gradually leave us and turn in another direction. (Berry, 2003, p.85)

- (2) ST2: 我听到家珍在池塘那边轻声应答, 我跑过去看到家珍坐在地上, 正使劲想站起来, 我把她扶起来时, 发现她身上的衣服都湿透了. (Yu, 2010, p.90)

TT2: I heard Jiazhen’s faint voice coming from the pond. I ran over and saw Jiazhen sitting on the ground, trying with all her might to stand up. As I helped her up, I discovered that her clothes were soaked. (Berry, 2003, p.115)

In ST1 and TT1, “I” refers to the story teller who is a young folk-song collector. He was there to record what Fugui said and sometimes he gave some comments on Fugui’s story and showed his sympathy for Fugui. In this

way, it can be emphasized that the work is narrated from folk perspective, instead of trying to create perfect hero images according to certain moral and social standard of value. While in ST2 and TT2, “I” refers to another narrator, Fugui, who is the hero of the story. Telling the story from Fugui’s perspective makes readers feel closer to the story, and can directly feel Fugui’s sadness and happiness.

By keeping the double first-person narrative point of view of the source text, Berry makes the story of his translation clearly and vividly told, and the translation is as powerfully moving and effective as the original. This translation method reflects Berry’s respect for the original text, which can be considered as Berry’s adaptive selection: He selects to keep the narrative point of view of the original to adapt to the translational eco-environment.

- (3) ST3: “你家少爷长大了准能当个二流子。” (Yu, 2010, p.8)  
TT3: “I guarantee you that the son of yours grows up, **he’ll be nothing but trouble**” (Berry, 2003, p.10)
- (4) ST4: 现在想起来叫我心疼啊, 我年轻时真是个王八蛋. (Yu, 2010, p.18)  
TT4: It hurts to think about it now. When I was young I was a real **asshole**. (Berry, 2003, p.23)
- (5) ST5: 二喜带来的城里人见了凤霞都说: “这偏头真有艳福。” (Yu, 2010, p.144)  
TT5: When Erxi’s friends from town saw Fengxia, they all said, “Wow, this **crooked-head** of ours really lucked out.” (Berry, 2003, p.184)

Expressions like “二流子”, “偏头” used in the novel are quite local and colloquial, and are commonly used in the local village. In the translation, Berry equally translates them as “nothing but trouble”, “crooked-head”. Foul language such as “王八蛋” is literally translated as “a real asshole”, thus producing the same linguistic environment created by the original text. The translator makes selection to preserve these dirty words in his translation, so the target text keeps the local flavor of the source text, which conveys the localism of Yu Hua’s work. The localism has a strong appeal to target readers, and makes the translation adapt to the translational eco-environment.

- (6) ST6: 我给了她两巴掌, 家珍的脑袋像是拨浪鼓那样摇晃了几下. (Yu, 2010, p.18)  
TT6: I slapped her twice, and her head swayed back and forth like **a toy rattle**. (Berry, 2003, p.23)  
ST7: 过了一会, 我听到爹在那边像是吹唢呐般地哭上了. (Yu, 2010, p.23)  
TT7: After a while I heard the **woodwind-like** sound of my father weeping. (Berry, 2003, p.30)

“拨浪鼓” is a traditional toy of China, which is beyond most target readers. However, Berry did not change the original simile. Instead, he simply retains it by putting it into “like a toy rattle”, which is a functionally equivalent

expression for “像拨浪鼓那样”, thus keeping the original flavor faithfully in his version. “唢呐” is a traditional Chinese instrument which is beyond western readers. To convey the vivid description of Fugui’s father weeping, Berry translated “唢呐” as “woodwind”, and the original simile “像是吹唢呐般地” is put into “woodwind-like”. In this way, the target readers can easily feel the grief of Fugui’s father, as if his weeping sound still echoes in readers’ ears.

In brief, in pursuit of the reality and original words, the source text is full of dialect and exudes a strong local flavor. From the standpoint of ordinary people, “ordinary people language” is used to make the work more locally, the characters more realistic and more moving. In the English version, the original narrator’s point view, the colloquialism of style and the vividness of image are all reproduced by Berry through his selection of literal translation strategy. Those characteristics of the original text are very important features of the translational eco-environment of source text. Berry’s faithful reproduction of these features makes the target text keep the flavor of the source text, which is an effective way to selectively adapt to his translational eco-environment.

## 2.2 Adaptation and Selection From the Cultural Dimension

Cultural dimension is very important in translator’s adaptation to translational eco-environment. Hu (2004, p.176) points out that the translator should have cultural awareness and overcome the barrier of cultural differences during the translation process. While translating *To Live*, Berry pays much attention to culture difference, so as to avoid misunderstanding and make the translation well received by target readers. Broadly speaking, culture refers to the entire way of the social life. As a cross-culture event, translation brings the cultural conflicts into focus. The conflicts are usually inevitable and even insurmountable in message transfer. With regard to such conflicts, what a translator needs to do is to preserve the original culture and meanwhile make sure that the target readers can correctly perceive this alien culture. In the course of cultural translation, the translators’ adaptation may refer to the oriental culture and occidental culture at the same time. Only by owning sufficient knowledge of both cultures can a translator be qualified and flexible for the selection in the translational eco-environment. Here are some examples.

- (7) ST1: 那时候我们家境还没有败落, 我们徐家有一百多亩地. (Yu, 2010, p.7)  
TT1: At the time our family circumstance had yet to take a turn for the worse. Our family had over one hundred mu of land.  
(**mu: Chinese unit of area equivalent to 1/7 acre or 0.0667 hectare.**) (Berry, 2003, p.10)
- (8) ST2: 我念过几年私塾, 穿长衫的私塾先生叫我念一段书时, 是我最高兴的. (Yu, 2010)

TT2: I studied for a few years at **an old-style private school**. When the schoolteacher, wearing the traditional long gown, called on me to read a paragraph aloud, it was my happiest moment. (Berry, 2003, p.10)

- (9) ST3: 我那副模样让她信了, 我娘一屁股坐到了地上, 抹着眼泪说: “上梁不正下梁歪啊。” (Yu, 2010, p.22)

TT3: The look on my face convinced her. My mother sat down on the floor and, wiping her tears, said. “**If the upper beam is not straight, the lower ones will go slant.**” (Berry, 2003, p.29)

- (10) ST4: 队长陪着城里来的风水先生在村里转悠开了, 说是要找一块风水宝地煮钢铁。 (Yu, 2013, p.82)

TT4: The team leader accompanied the town **fengshui expert** on a leisurely stroll around the village. He wanted to find **an ideal spot with perfect fengshui** to smelt iron. (Berry, 2003, p.105)

**(Fengshui, also known as geomancy, is the Chinese art of determining the geographic location of a house tomb, office, etc., that will have a greatest positive influence on the fortune of an individual, family or company that use it.)**

- (11) ST5: 可是想嫁出去的女儿就是泼出去的水, 凤霞早就是二喜的人了, 不能在家里呆得太久。 (Yu, 2010, p.157)

TT5: But when I thought about it, I knew that **a daughter married off was just like a pail of water that had been dumped out**. Fengxia already belonged to Erxi, and I knew she wouldn't be able to stay too long. (Berry, 2003, p.201)

Berry firstly transliterated the original measure units (i.e. mu), then explained the measure unit “亩” as “unit of area”. He also compared the Chinese measure units with the English units (i.e. “... equivalent to ...”) to make his translation more understandable to the target readers. In this way, Berry helps to deliver Chinese cultural elements to English readers which are one of Berry's motivations to translate the novel. “长衫” was translated into “the traditional long gown”, “私塾” into “an old-style private school” and “fengshui” with a detailed explanation.

The literal translation of sayings like “上梁不正下梁歪”, “嫁出去的女儿就是泼出去的水” would be beneficial to spread Chinese culture to other countries. In the original, “上梁不正下梁歪” is a Chinese saying which means that “if the older generation (or the superior) does not set a good example, the younger generation (or the inferior) will follow suit and do something bad.” Here “上梁” and “下梁” are metaphors for different generations or superior/inferior. It is obvious that this Chinese saying can be translated liberally to convey its meaning.

However, Berry rendered it literally, which to some extent is more preferable than rendered otherwise, as this way of translation realizes Berry's motivation of translation, which is to spread Chinese culture to the western world. Besides, the literally rendered version is not so hard for target readers to understand. The original saying “嫁出去的女儿就是泼出去的水” is rendered literally, through which Berry attempts to spread Chinese culture and ideology to target readers, which corresponds to his aim of translation. Thus, it can be said that through his selection of literal translation strategy, Berry makes his translation well adapt to his translational eco-environment. Through this way, Chinese flavor is kept in the translation, which would meet the need of target readers who are eager to know more about Chinese culture. Meanwhile, the liberal translation would make the target text be consistent with the target culture, so that readers can understand it clearly. It is also in this way that Berry makes selective adaptation in his translation so as to make the version more acceptable to the target English readers. The following are some examples:

- (12) ST6: “他对你们进行白色统治, 他欺压你们, 你们要起来反抗, 要砸断他的狗腿。” (Yu, 2010, p.152)

TT6: “He's been making you live through a **white terror**, oppressing and belittling you! You must stand up and rebel! Break his fucking legs!” (Berry, 2003, p.195)

- (13) ST7: 凤霞他们的枕巾上印着: 千万不要忘记阶级斗争。 (Yu, 2010, p.150)

TT7: Printed on Fengxia's pillowcase was “**Never forget Class Struggle.**” (Berry, 2003, p.192)

In the above two examples, the two historical-specific terms are translated literally so that the versions can be well understood by the target readers. The first term “white terror” was initiated from French Revolution, and has come to mean “the terror brought about by reactionary forces as a counterrevolutionary measure” (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary). The second term “Class Struggle” can be easily understood as the struggle between different classes. Both of them are fully understandable to target readers. In addition to the above two examples, other historical-specific expressions such as “人民公社” and “自留地” are literally translated as “people's communes” and “private plot of land”, which can make sense to the English readers.

However, there are still some other terms which would be hard to understand if they are rendered literally. In this case, Berry would use literal translation plus annotation to make the version understandable to the target readers. For example:

- (14) ST8: 村里人下地干活开始记工分了, 我算是一个壮劳力, 给我算十分..... (Yu, 2010, p.94)

TT8: When the other villagers went down to the fields to work, they started to keep track of **work point\***. I was considered a strong worker, so they gave me ten points. (\*A unit indicating

**the quantity and quality of labor performed and the amount of payment earned in rural communes.)** (Berry, 2003, p.120)

In this example, Berry firstly handled the original “工分” literally, and then at the bottom of the page he added an annotation to explain what “work point” is. In this way, the target readers can not only get some idea of the Chinese cultural color of the original, but also the accurate meaning of the original term “工分”. Berry also used this way to render the term “大字报”, which is literally put into “big character posters”. And at the bottom of the page, he added an annotation to explain what it is and during which period of time it occurred. Here the selection of the methods of literal translation plus annotation not only conveys the original meaning, but also reproduces its cultural flavor, which can fully satisfy the needs of the English readers for Chinese culture. In this way the translator makes his translation effectively adapt to his translational cultural eco-environment.

### 2.3 Adaptation and Selection From the Communicative Dimension

Translation from the communicative dimension doesn't mean that communicative translation is definitely better than semantic translation in realizing the interpersonal effect. Generally, the communicative translation generalizes and simplifies the original meaning so as to facilitate the target readers' understanding. In this way, only part of the original meaning can be conveyed to the target readers, which actually destroys the interpersonal effect. Hu (2004b) points out that adaptation and selection from the communicative dimension refer to the realization of source text's intention in the target text. To a certain extent, the above analyses of the two dimensions both relate to the communicative dimension, as Hu claims that the three dimensions have some internal and logical relation. In the following analysis, Berry's translation of Chinese ideology into the target text will be focused on, so as to find out how the translator adapts and selects in the translational eco-environment from the communicative dimension. Look at the following examples.

- (15) ST1: 皇帝招我做女婿, 路途迢迢我不去. (Yu, 2010, p.5)  
TT1: The emperor beckons me; he wants me to marry his daughter. The road to the capital is long and distant: I don't want her. (Berry, 2003, p.7)
- (16) ST2: 少年去游荡, 中年想掘藏, 老年做和尚. (Yu, 2010, p.190)  
TT2: In my younger days I wandered amuck, at middle age I wanted to stash everything in a trunk, and now that I'm old I've become a monk. (Berry, 2003, p.240)
- (17) ST3: “做人还是平常点好, 争这个争那个, 争来争去赔了自己的命.” (Yu, 2010, p.181)

TT3: “It's better to live an ordinary life. If you go on striving for this and that, you'll end up paying with your life.” (Berry, 2003, p.231)

Chinese ideology is the way that Chinese people look at things. It is as old as Chinese culture and related to social background. It is a system making up Chinese spiritual world and enhancing the development of Chinese philosophy. Reflection of Chinese traditional thinking at that time is one of the writing purposes of the original text, so it is essential for the translator to reflect it in the translation. These examples reflect Chinese people's ideology of life which is pursuing peace and never striving for something with others. This ideology is quite different from that of western people. Berry honestly reflected the Chinese ideology of life in his translation. In ST1, the emperor beckons “me”, but “I” refuse, which shows that Chinese people's aim of living is not to get money or power but to live an ordinary and peaceful life. In ST3, “It's better to live an ordinary life” also reflects Chinese people's value of life. In Chinese ideology of life, it is better to let life go as it is and there is no need to strive for something because it is meaningless at the end of life. Berry's translation of these sentences accurately transfers Chinese ideology of life to western people, which is one of his translation motivations. As Berry tries to realize his translation motivations, he keeps the Chinese ideology in his translation, which is his adaptive selection to make his translation live harmoniously with the translational eco-environment.

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## CONCLUSION

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According to the analysis of Berry's translation of folk cultural elements in *To Live* from the three different dimensions, it can be concluded that his selection in the translation properly adapts to the translational eco-environment from linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions. In linguistic dimension, Berry keeps the linguistic features including the first person narrative point of view and simplicity of language. In addition, some similes in the original text are also literally rendered so that the vivid images are well retained. Besides, some rearrangements like the handling of repetition and the sentence order are made in an effort to create a similar mood or feeling found in the source text. In cultural dimension, Berry adopts literal translation most of the time in order to transfer the original Chinese cultural flavor to the target readers. As some literally rendered cultural specific terms can hardly be understood by target readers, Berry frequently adds annotations to them to explain their implications to the target readers. In this way, the translation is not only adapted to the source text, but also to the target readers. In communicative dimension, the author Yu Hua expresses Chinese ideology of life in the novel which is quite different from the American ideology. Berry in his translation tried to follow

Yu Hua's ideology in an effort to spread Chinese ideology to the western world. As to translation strategy, most of the time, Berry chooses literal translation. However, sometimes, when literal translation cannot achieve the particular purpose in a specific translation, he will use liberal translation to cater to the target readers' language conventions, cultural expectations and aesthetic tastes. It is hoped that the present study can arouse more interest from researchers to do translation criticism from the perspective of eco-translatology and make more scholars pay attention to the translator Michael Berry.

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