A Review on Textless Back Translation of China-Themed Works Written in English

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Abstract

Textless back translation here refers to the kind of back translation in which the translator retranslates China-themed works written in English language back into Chinese language. In recent years, the phenomenon of textless back translation has begun to draw a closer attention from the academic circles and arouse heated discussions among scholars and experts. This paper, starting from back translation, aims to review the previous studies on textless back translation of China-themed works written in English in terms of definition, classification as well as related studies both at home and abroad. Furthermore, authors of the paper attempt to propose several deficiencies that need to be tackled in future studies: (a) inconsistent use of terms; (b) the lack of comparative studies between textless back translation and back translation in general; (c) the lack of systematic theoretical studies on textless back translation and the studies that treat textless back translation as a separate category of translation studies.

Key words: Textless back translation; Back translation; China-themed works written in English

1. STUDIES ON BACK TRANSLATION

1.1 Back Translation: Definition and Its Studies

As a topic under heated debate, back translation has been more than once termed in translation studies home and abroad.

According to the *Dictionary of Translation Studies* (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 2004, pp.14-15), "back translation" is "a process in which a text which has been translated into a given language is retranslated into SL" and has been used for "different purposes" — it is sometimes used to "illustrate the sometimes vast structural and conceptual differences which exist between SL and TL", sometimes used to "refer to a GLOSS TRANSLATION" of the original Biblical text" and sometimes used in "contrastive linguistics as a technique for comparing specific syntactic, morphological or lexical features from two or more languages". The book then lists other scholars' definitions of back-translation as follows:

> An early use of the term in this context can be found in Spalatin (1967), while Ivir defines back translation as "a check on the semantic content" (1981, p.59) which can be used to reveal instances of FORMAL CORRESPONDENCE. Casagrande (1954) proposes a similar procedure to diagnose "trouble-points in the process of transcoding". (1954, p.339)

In China, Feng (2001, p.434) claims that back translation is a kind of translation that considers the translation text as the source text. Later on, Feng and Li (2002, p.469) add that back-translation is "the re-translation of the original translation", and can be used to "test the accuracy of the original translation text." According to *A Companion for Chinese Translators* (1997, p.303), back translation "translates text in language A into text in language B, and then quotes and translates materials in language B into texts in language A or retranslates texts in language C / language D into texts in the source language." In *A Dictionary of Translation*

Studies (Fang, 2011, pp.97-98), back translation refers to "re-translate the translation text (the writer's self-translated work or others' translation texts) back into the source language".

Wang (2007) elaborates on the definition, mode, principles as well as regulations of back translation and then points out that back translator should boast bilingual knowledge as well as bi-cultural knowledge and be capable of conducting cultural adaptation. Wang (2005) examines what the study of back translation can bring to translation studies and contrastive studies and discusses the relationship between back translation, translation studies and comparative studies of English and Chinese. According to his explanation, only when back translation is acknowledged, like translation, as a means of communication, can back translation studies be conducted. And to him, back-translation is in fact "a means of communication that duplicates the original communication behavior". According to Chen and Pan (2008), back translation looks back upon the intrinsic linguistic and cultural relationship between the back translation text and the original text. Taking the works about the Chinese culture that are written in English as an example, this kind of translation aims to present cultural materials or texts that stem from the Chinese culture and depict them in the Chinese language. Here, back translation is considered as an "intersection of cultural localization and globalization" (Chen & Pan, 2008, p.59).

1.2 Back Translation: Classification

On account of all the above-mentioned definitions, Jiang (2013, p.298) points out that "[t]aking Chinese-English translation as an example, back-translation includes three types of text—the original text, the English Translation Text 1 (original translation text) and the Chinese Translation Text 2 (back-translation text)".

Wang (2010, p.221) divides back-translation into two types, namely "back translation for testing" and "back translation for research". "Back translation for testing" aims to go back to the original text. Yet as translation is an irreversible process, it is not always an easy task to go back.
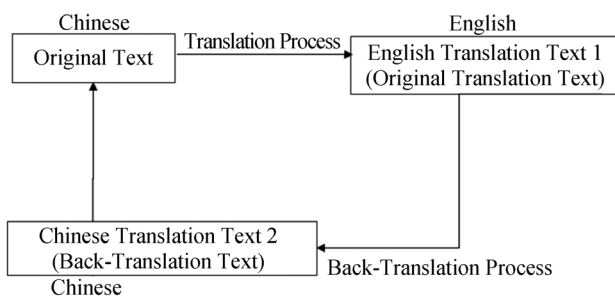

Figure 1
Back Translation for Testing

On the other hand, "back translation for research" aims to "experiment and try to figure out what would happen in the practice of back translation and see what

kind of explanation or statement should be made from the theoretical perspective". This kind of translation doesn't focus on going back to the original text, but rather emphasizes the back translation process.
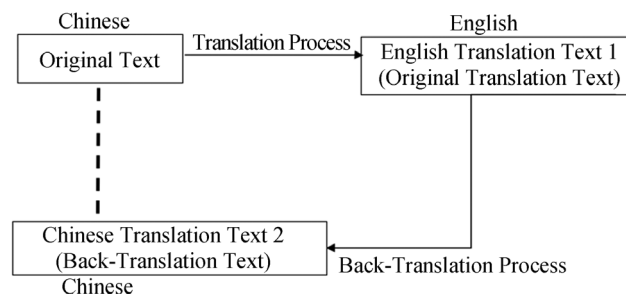

Figure 2
Back Translation for Research

Wang and Lan (2011, pp.97-98) amend the classification in *A Dictionary of Translation Studies* by claiming that there are three kinds of back translation—"back translation for testing", "back translation for research" and "mechanical back translation". "Back translation for testing" serves as an approach to "check the translation process and improve the quality of translation". "Back translation for research" aims to "experiment and try to figure out what would happen in the practice of back translation and see what kind of explanation or statement should be made from the theoretical perspective". "Mechanical back translation" is a kind of reversion of the source text (mostly sentences or texts of smaller units). And when it comes to biographical names, they should be named "after the original sounds".

2. STUDIES ON TEXTLESS BACK TRANSLATION

2.1 Textless Back Translation: Definition and its Studies

As early as in 1994, Liang refers to the phenomenon of textless back translation as "fuyi" (复译, retranslation) and lists several difficulties in translating *A Leaf in the Storm* and other works of this kind. Wu and Li (2004) also touch upon the phenomenon of cultural back translation as "a special kind of back translation".

In the year 2009, Wang (2009, p.236) first proposes the concept of "rootless back translation":

> In the 1930s, Lin Yutang wrote the English novel *Moment in Peking* on foreign land. This novel now boasts three Chinese translations. The novel focuses on Chinese culture and the life of Old Beijing, but is written in English. Translation of this kind signifies the return only on cultural terms, rather than on linguistic terms and is therefore named "rootless back translation" —namely a kind of back translation that draws on no original text.

Later on, Wang (2015, pp.1-9) rectifies the term "rootless back translation" and replaces it with "textless

back translation", for though there is no existing Chinese text for translators to draw on, back translation of this kind still retains its cultural roots. According to his explanation, "textless back translation" refers to the kind of back translation in which translators translate China-themed literary works written in foreign languages (such as English) back into Chinese and resell the translated texts to the Chinese readers.

In their research on *Moment in Peking*, Wang and Jiang (2012) employ some new terms such as "foreign language creation" (异语创作), "Chinese/rootless back translation" (无根回译) and "original text restoration" (原文复现) for case analysis and for further studies on "literary works about the Chinese culture written in a foreign language and translated into Chinese again". Jiang (2013) explores the theory of "rootless back translation", including its application scope, reference factors, translation evaluation and its final version. In the same article where he puts forward the concept of "textless back translation", Wang (2015) then focuses on the manipulation of paratexts such as title, preface and of the novel's content, deepening our understanding of culture and texts. Based on *A Judge Dee Mystery* (2016), Wang elaborates on a series of related theoretical issues, including culture reconstruction and misconception in textless back translation and points out the theoretical significance of textless back translation, its diversity in practice as well as its influence on the translation of contemporary Chinese literature into foreign languages so as to "justify and explain" textless back translation from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

2.2 Works for Textless Back Translation: Classification

Based on the identity of writers, literary works that text-less back translation studies focus on can be divided into four categories—works of domestic writers (国内作家), works of overseas Chinese writers (侨民作家), works of foreign writers of Chinese origin (华裔作家) and works of foreign writers (外国作家).

According to Jiang (2013, p.311), as writers are "of different ethnic and culture identities" and "with different perceptions of affiliation", their understandings of the traditional Chinese culture reflected in their works vary from writer to writer. On account of this fact, it is essential to classify the writers of this kind and proceed further with detailed studies on them respectively.

2.2.1 Works of Domestic Writers
The first category is the works of domestic writers, represented by Yang Xianyi's *White Tiger* and Xiao Qian's self-translated work *How the Tillers Win Back Their Land*.

The two representative writers are here both graduated from such famous universities as Merton College, Oxford and Cambridge University, which provide them both with excellent command of written English—the perfect ability to express themselves.

Yet for different purposes, different strategies are deployed here for writing and translation. In his self-translated novel, Xiao Qian rewrites the lines in the Chinese translated version by using the strategy of deletion. Likewise, Yang Xianyi's wording appears differently in different versions of his biography. Originally titled *White Tiger* in English, the translated Chinese versions of the book publish in mainland China with a title "Look back on the old days in an leaked ship with white spirits" (漏船载酒忆当年) in Chinese and in Hongkong with a title "The White Tiger Star shining above my life" (白虎星照命). Besides, certain paragraphs and chapters in the book are as well abridged and rewritten—a phenomenon that's worth noticing.

2.2.2 Works of Overseas Chinese Writers
The second category is the works of Chinese writers with overseas life experiences, represented by Lin Yutang's *Moment in Peking*, *A Leaf in the Storm*, *The Vermilion Gate*, *My Country and My People*, *The Art of Living*, his self-translated novel *Between Tears and Laughter*, his commentaries *The Spirit of Chinese Culture* and Eileen Chang's self-translated novel *Naked Earth*, *The Rice-Sprout Song*, *Stale Mates—A Short Story Set in the Time When Love Came to China*, *Demons and Fairies*, *Still Alive*, *Chinese Life and Fashions*, *China: Educating the Family*, *Wife, Vamp, Child*.

The two writers listed above share similar life experiences that they grow up in China being very familiar with the traditional Chinese culture and receive western education respectively at St. John's University and St. Mary's Hall, two of the missionary schools, which equips them with certain western perspectives as well as profound linguistic knowledge in English. Both of them go on living abroad, as in the United States and France and finish their China-related literary works in the English language there. Their works are deeply-rooted in the traditional Chinese culture and their love for Chinese culture is clearly expressed through positive tone in writing and aims to introduce the extensive and profound Chinese culture to the Western readers.

2.2.3 Works of Foreign Writers of Chinese Origin
The third category is the works of foreign writers of Chinese origin, represented by Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*, Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Gish Jen's *Who's Irish*, Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* , Gus Lee's *China Boy*, etc..

The writers that belong to this category are normally second- or third-generation immigrants, whose parents or grandparents come all the way from China to start a new life. In other words, the writers of this category were born on foreign lands and may have not really set their feet on China. With no first-hand experience, their knowledge of the traditional Chinese culture is often acquired through eyewitness' accounts at home and in local Chinese communities.

Taking Jade Snow Wong for example, she grows up in an American Chinese family in San Francisco with a fairly strict upbringing. According to her autobiographical novel *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Wong's father starts teaching her Chinese characters and ancient Chinese poetry since her early age and is very much concerned with her manners and behaviors. In the Chinese community where she lives, traditional Chinese customs are well-preserved. Wong gets to learn about sewing, laundering and cooking—chores normally done by traditional Chinese women like her mother and grandmother. She gets to celebrate lunar Chinese New Year and worship ancestors on Tomb-sweeping Day. In the meantime, she gets to meet white friends and receive education from white teachers, bringing her different Western outlook on life. In the novel, Wong experiences direct conflicts with her parents over the choice between individuality and obedience. Wong's idea is clearly expressed in the novel—each and every man has the right to live for him/herself as well as the right to seek for personal and independent development. On the one hand, with no direct culture experiences in China, Wong's depiction in the novel may not always be fair and objective, often mixed with subjective sentiments. On the other hand, as a member of immigrants with her account of Western values, the cultural clash is noted as an important part of the story and becomes more of an issue here.

2.2.4 Works of Foreign Writers

The fourth category is the works of foreign writers, mainly novels and biography, represented by American writer Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*, *Sons* and *A House Divided* , Dutch writer Robert Hans van Gulik's *A Judge Dee Mystery*, English writer John Otway Percy Bland's *Li Hung-Chang*, English writers John Otway Percy Bland and Edmund Backhouse's *China under Empress Dowager* , American writer W. J. Hail's *Tseng Kuo Fan*, American writer W. L. Bales' *Tso Tsung Tang*.

In spite of their identity as foreigners, the writers of this category are fairly familiar with China. Most of them live in China for decades and have a close relationship with China. For instance, Pearl S. Buck keeps in touch with some senior intellectuals personally, such as Lao She and Xu Zhimo. Robert Hans van Gulik marries a Chinese wife, who is known as the granddaughter of Zhang Zhidong—a senior official in the Qing Dynasty. Such personal bonds bring these writers in closer touch with the traditional Chinese culture. Many of them later develop deeper feelings for China and its culture and would like to depict China themselves.

Nevertheless, much as the writers of this category try to introduce the Chinese culture, there is no gainsaying that they are still of white origin and are very much likely to be affected by their "inherent sense of superiority" (Jiang, 2013, p.309), which can be a point that awaits further studies.

2.3 Studies on Textless Back Translated Works From the Perspective of Cultural Back Translation

Based on a case study of *Joy Luck Club* and its Chinese translation, Liu (2005) argues that when an obvious or latent back translation of Chinese texts is conducted, it is hard to achieve equivalence. She adds that translating and introducing works of contemporary Chinese American literature has become an inevitable trend and that researches in this field should therefore be taken into consideration at home. In her paper, Liu also proposes a few problems "calling for translators' attention during the back-translation of Chinese culture specific items". Zhou (2008) studies *The Joy Luck Club*—a representative of "diasporic literature" and elaborates on "full-sense translation" as a new conception that requires the translator's attempt to "convey the multiple meaning contained in the original", signifying "respect for linguistic and cultural differences". Li and Xian (2009) focus on Lin Yutang's *The Wisdom of China and India* and makes an in-depth discussion of the back translation phenomenon in English-Chinese translation. They claim that translators should not only be familiar with the original text to be translated, but also with other works of the writer as well as main figures and literary allusions involved, so as to end up with accurate translations. Ren (2010) attempts to introduce "the Cultural Return Translation" with the adaptation theory and assume that the translation by nature is a complicated activity involving continuous choice-makings and adaptations, especially this particular kind of literary translation loaded with rich native culture. On account of his own translation practice, Ye (2012) discusses the back translation strategy for Chinese culture elements such as names of characters, places, officials, organizations as well as for the contents of memorials to the throne and some other documents. He points out that the translation of China-related literary works not only provides a new perspective for language, culture and history studies at home and promotes cultural exchanges, but also proposes a new topic for translation studies. Wei (2013) also analyzes the back translation strategy for Chinese culture elements in social science books. According to his statements, it lies in translators' duty to be faithful to the original text and it lies in their power to be faithful to facts and cultural common sense in China. Guo and Ge (2014) establish a self-compiled English-Chinese bilingual corpus to study Lisa See's *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* and Xin Yuanjie's Chinese translation and point out that "the choice of language in the translating process" should adapt to "the target language rather than the source language". He (2015) studies the Chinese translation of *The Woman Warrior* from translation norms perspective, holding that we need to go beyond the simple relationship between the source text and the target text, and takes external social-cultural elements into consideration so as to build a more objective

and powerful research pattern. Based on *The Good Earth* and its Chinese version, J. Li and C. B. Li (2015) make a deep analysis of the Chinese culture originally translated into English in the novel, pointing out the positive significance for translation and dissemination of the Chinese culture. Jiang (2016) uses the theory of general rhetoric and discusses the cultural reduction of address terms in *Moment in Peking*, holding that translators should try hard as they can to restore the culture of address terms in the Chinese context.

2.4 Studies on Textless Back Translated Works From the Perspective of Self-Translation

In the West, representative studies of related studies are journal papers written by Li (2006), Ehrlich (2009), J. Li and C. B. Li (2016). Based on Eileen Chang's short story *Stale Mates—A Short Story Set in the Time When Love Came to China* and her own Chinese translation of this story *Wusi yishi*, Li (2006) asserts that Eileen Chang "both preserves and transforms her descriptions of physical beauty in *Stale Mates*" by "making changes to the representations of the body" in *Wusi yishi*. He goes on to claim that "having implicitly re-evaluated and explicitly re-contextualised *Stale Mates* in *Wusi yishi*, Chang points to a transcultural aesthetics of the body, which incorporates both Chinese and Western cultural influences". Ehrlich (2009) points out that the self-translator in question follows "common translation procedures" in spite of the fact that he/she boasts "an authority and a liberty that other translators usually lack" and that "the type of process followed" is fundamentally determined by the fact that "a transfer between two language systems has been made" instead of "the identity or status of the producer". With the help of corpus software, J. Li and C. B. Li (2016) compare the self-translation and conventional translation of *Between Tears and Laughter* from gender translation perspective, holding that Lin Yutang and Song Biyun show their similarities and differences in the way they manipulate and "woman-handle" the text and that translation is closely tied to the translator's literacy, biological gender, motivations, political stance as well as the specific historical and social environment.

In China, scholars tend to do researches from diverse perspectives—as is reflected in the studies of Lin (2005), Chen (2007, 2008, 2009), Wang (2007), Kuang (2007), Wang (2009), Li and Yang (2014), Yan and Wang (2015) etc. On account of Xiao Qian's literary works, Lin (2005) touches upon the methodological diversity in literary translation and deems it a new trail to "exclude source text elements", thereby granting "the freedom to diversify" translators' "strategies in accordance with, among other factors, the genre, the epoch, and the reader concerned." Chen (2007) discusses Eileen Chang's self-translated work *The Golden Cangue* from an ontological perspective, characterized by her "Chinese cultural perspectives, the author's authority and feminist gender standpoints".

Later Chen (2009) uses Eileen Chang's self-translated texts, compares the texts from different levels and aims to put forward theoretical ideas on self-translation. Wang (2009) notices Eileen Chang's special operations that "violate traditional translation conventions" —including "cuts, additions and narrative changes" and discusses these operations from a postcolonial perspective. With the help of parallel corpus, Li and Yang (2014) analyze the self-translated text of Lin Yutang's *Between Tears and Laughter*. They point out that Lin's comprehensive strategy is basically in line with his translation values as well as the general rules of translation, whereas certain personal features are reflected in some partial devices, which may reflect the translators' own distinctive style. Yan and Wang (2015) explore "the representation of the defamiliarization devices which show the original literariness in her self-translation" and suggest that translator's and author's "poetic orientation and aesthetic appeals" are sort of consistent and that the conflicts between the two disappear in self-translation.

3. DEFICIENCIES OF PREVIOUS STUDIES

Seen from the previous studies regarding textless back translation, there are at least three harsh problems that are worth mentioning: (a) inconsistent use of terms; (b) the lack of comparative studies between textless back translation and back translation in general; (c) the lack of systematic theoretical studies on textless back translation and the studies that treat textless back translation as a separate category of translation studies.

As is mentioned above, although some scholars have previously noticed the special phenomenon of textless back translation, "generally their ideas are quite confusing" (Jiang, 2012, p.IX) and different terms are used by different scholars to discuss this phenomenon—terms such as "back translation", "cultural back translation", "cultural restoration" and "restoration translation" have all been used to refer to this same phenomenon.

While much attention is paid to translation studies and back translation studies in recent years, previous studies on textless back translation are rather rare, not to mention comparative studies between textless back translation and traditional back translation. As to the very few studies that touch upon this topic, text-less back translation is more often considered to be part of traditional translation or traditional back translation, rather than an independent category on its own.

Though case studies on a specific work by a specific writer are frequently seen, there is still much room for studying the works of this kind as a whole, covering such aspects as similarities shared by various textless back translations and their differences. As a separate category of translation studies, more systematic investigations

are yet to be made regarding the operating mechanism, principles, strategies as well as criteria of textless back translation.

Besides, most of the previous studies tend to study this phenomenon from a single perspective—either focusing on back translation practice or going to the text interpretation and explanation, which lacks something new in terms of theoretical framework and methodology. As a result, further studies could be able to focus not only on the linguistic matter, but also on the text output process in which textless back translators translate their works with their cultural awareness.

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