

## *Original Paper*

# On the Translation of Chinese Webcomics: A Case Study of *My*

## *Dear Highness*

Peng Liu<sup>1\*</sup> & Fu-ting Yu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> College of Foreign Languages, China Three Gorges University, Yichang, China

\* Peng Liu, E-mail: 769909053@qq.com

Received: June 9, 2022

Accepted: July 3, 2022

Online Published: July 22, 2022

doi:10.22158/elsr.v3n3p1

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/elsr.v3n3p1>

### ***Abstract***

*This paper discusses how to translate Chinese webcomic strips using My Dear Highness as an example. In our translation practice, such methods as variation translation, omission, and shift were adopted to deal with address forms or lengthy sentences, while free translation was used to deal with four-character structures and culture-loaded words or phrases in the original text to the effect that the intended meaning of the source text can be accurately conveyed to target readers under a multimodal context. We believe that whatever methods are used, the ultimate purpose of translation remains the same, and that is, the reading experience provided by the original text can be restored to the greatest possible extent.*

### ***Keywords***

*translation of Chinese webcomics, My Dear Highness, multimodality*

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, more and more Chinese video games, films, TV dramas along with literary works have been produced and some of them have been translated into foreign languages and are accessible online. To ensure the quality of such translation has becoming an issue as well. Out of this consideration, we take *My Dear Highness* as an example to explore the translation methods of Chinese comic strips. The example is an ancient-style fantasy comic strip published serially on Tencent Animation & Comics, describing the protagonists' journey to the mortal world. To be specific, we will explore how to represent the linguistic features of the original text, how to balance image and text in the representation and how to deal with the culture-loaded words in translation, as all these three aspects pose challenges for translators of similar texts.

## 2. Theoretical Background

In the context of increasingly rich and complex media forms and modes, it is necessary for translation researchers to explore the construction and transformation of meanings of other modal symbols in translation. Therefore, multimodality is sometimes used to investigate the contribution that non-verbal semiotics makes to a range of genres and texts, while gauging how the distribution of meaning across various types of meaning-making resources influences translation (University of Manchester, 2022). Specifically, a mode is a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning, such as images, writing, layout, music, gestures, speech, moving images, etc. (Kress, 2010). Furthermore, Haase and Stöckl (1998) developed a system network for modalities by investigating the semiotics of language and image in printed media. “He posits all semiotic resources as consisting of core modes such as language, medial variants (e.g. writing), peripheral modes (e.g. typography), sub-modes (e.g. color) and features (e.g. saturation) and demonstrates that modes can be distinguished through their semiotic properties, their cognitive orientation and their semantic potential” (Kaindl, 2004). The translation of comic strips, accordingly, falls within the survey of multimodal analysis.

Some translation scholars have studied the multimodal characteristics of the translation of comic strips. For example, Kaindl (2004) comprehensively analyzed the characteristics and elements of comic strip translation and proposed that the study of such translation should take into consideration three modalities: linguistic, typographic, and pictorial. In another article, Kaindl (1999) also discussed how each of these three modalities conveys humorous messages in the translation of comic strips. Borodo (2015) analysed the interaction between the textual and pictorial modalities in the translation of comic strips and how this affects the choice of translation strategy. According to Halliday’s linguistic theory, the relationship between text and picture can be divided into three categories, namely: elaboration, extension, and enhancement (Martinec & Salway, 2005). In an image-rich multimodal discourse such as comic strips, the visual mode plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning, and the combination and interaction of speech and visual images are vital to meaning generation; moreover, speech and visual images are often in a complementary relationship, referring to different dimensions of meaning (Wu, 2021). Therefore, it is very important for a translator to cope with both the image and the text of a comic strip in the representational process. The following is an account of what we did in the translation of the Chinese comic strip *My Dear Highness*.

## 3. Variation Translation under a Multimodal Context

In the translation process, the interaction between visual image mode and speech mode undergoes a series of changes according to the negotiation between the source language and the cultural context and social conventions of the target language, presenting examples showing how the color, size, and content of the image are modified; meanwhile, the speech undergoes adjustments and modifications such as reduction, expansion, and rewriting (Wu, 2021). Such translation skills are what we actually adopted in the treatment of the Chinese webcomics *My Dear Highness*.

### 3.1 Selection of Proper Translation

In translation, it is common that the same expression in the original text may have to turn into different versions according to different contexts. For example, the Chinese word “皇上” as an address form constantly appears in the comic strip *My Dear Highness*, the source text (ST here after), and its translation has to be variable according to different occasions. For instance, the sentence in Picture 1 is said secretly by one of the officials, showing that some of the officials have noticed that Ling Zhi-xi, the emperor, is much braver. Obviously, we can tell from the scene that he is not talking directly to the emperor. Therefore, *His Majesty* is an appropriate English equivalent in the target text (TT here after), while in Example 2, the Chinese word is used to address the emperor face to face, so *Your Majesty* will be a better choice which conforms to the English speaking convention.

#### Example 1



**Picture 1**

#### Example 2

ST: --- 皇上?

TT: --- Your Majesty?

Discourse-analytical studies have shown that non-verbal elements like facial expressions and gestures often play a significant role in face-to-face communication. When it comes to comic strips, the interdependence between verbal and non-verbal components is also important in depicting a character. Moreover, in comic strips, actions and dialogues are closely intertwined with the visual representation of characters (Kaindl, 2004). Therefore, in the translation of the characters' utterances, some punctuation marks can sometimes be changed or added to express the exact emotion of the characters, and to transmit meanings contained in the para-verbal modes. For example, the translation of the Chinese sentence 一个使臣还不行礼 in the original text can be faithful only with the addition of both a question mark and an exclamation mark to indicate Ling Zhi-xi's anger as shown below in Picture 2, since she looks unhappy with her eyebrows raised.

## Example 3



Picture 2

**ST:** 一个使臣还不行礼

**TT:** How dare an envoy not bow to me?!

In comic strips, expressions are usually short and concise for the convenience of reading and space-saving purpose. In Example 4 below, the Chinese sentence “心，感觉静不下来...” was divided into two separate balloons to emphasize that Xiao Han is in an excited mood. Its literal translation would be “It feels like my heart can’t be quiet”. However, we cannot put the English translation in one line as what we normally do since it is not faithful to the original text and fails to fully represent the emotional state of the character. For this reason, we divided its English version into two parts in imitation of the original and put them into two balloons which are close to each other so that the translation can be read at the same time.

## Example 4

**ST:** 心，

感觉静不下来...

**TT:** My heart...

is beating fast...

## 3.2 Omission of Non-essential Words

Because most of the target readers of *My Dear Highness* are young people and their language is mostly casual, while the original text is more verbalized and contains some non-essential expressions, so it is necessary to make appropriate deletions of such unnecessary expressions in their English translation to ensure proper conveyance of the communicative meaning of the original text under a multimodal context.

As most of the story of the comic strip takes place in the palace, observances of the royal etiquette and protocol are a must. For example, when the emissary from Liang State pays a visit to the emperor of Ling, he says “梁国使臣顾庭，拜见凌帝!” at the opening scene as shown in Example 5. Here the verb “拜见” is appropriately used according to the royal etiquette. Yet, as shown by the multimodal

information in the comic strip, the emissary is already in the lobby of the palace, so there is no need to translate the verb, since its cultural connotation is self-evident in the scene. On other similar occasions, non-essential expressions like addressing terms and repetition are sometimes omitted to make a concise translation.

#### Example 5

**ST:** 梁国使臣顾庭，拜见凌帝!

**TT:** Your Majesty, I'm Gu Ting, envoy of Liang State.

Moreover, a line with too many words can become tedious to read and in the meantime, the space within a picture is limited as texts of comic strips are confined to a dialog box. Besides, an English sentence usually occupies more space than their Chinese equivalents in printing. Therefore, when dealing with a sentence with redundant components in the original text, a translator can reasonably adopt the method of omission. For instance, the context of the Chinese sentence in Example 6 below is that, Ling Zhi-xi is delighted to know that Xiao Han is wearing the clothes she has prepared for him, so she is eager to find him to take a look, with the subtext that “if she does not do that, she will not be able to see it anymore.” If the original sentence is literally translated into “I must go check on him. Or he will change into his court dress later and I will not be able to see it anymore”, the English version would seem a little lengthy. For this reason, the clause “就看不着了(and I will not be able to see it anymore)” in the original text is not translated in the final version.

#### Example 6

**ST:** 我得赶紧去看看，不然一会儿萧寒换了朝服就看不着了...

**TT:** I must go check on him; otherwise he will change into his court dress...

### 4. Free Translation of Four-character Structures and Culture-loaded Words

In the translation process of a comic strip, the interaction between visual image mode and speech mode changes according to the negotiation between the cultural context and social conventions of the source language and the target language. Translation becomes “rather the placing of linguistic symbols against the cultural background of a society than the rendering of words by their equivalents in another language” (Malinowski, 1935, p. 18) Therefore, translators have to take cultural issues seriously and always bear in mind the cultural implication of a sentence or an expression in their practice. It is found in the translation process of *My Dear Highness* that there are many four-character structures and culture-loaded words or phrases to be dealt with under a multimodal mode.

#### 4.1 Translation of Four-character Structures

In comic strips, line length and column width are both limited. Column width affects readability because of the way we read. Many people do not realize that we do not read character by character or even word by word; instead, we scan a line, pausing momentarily to record groups of three or four words. Studies have found that a reader can make three or four such pauses on a line before it becomes tiring. To determine line length for optimum readability, a good guideline is between 9 and 12 words for unjustified text (Striver, 2022). Therefore, when translating a sentence with four-character structures, such approaches as paraphrase or free translation can be adopted because those structures are usually brief in form yet rich in connotation, and a full translation of them may result in lengthy sentences. In this case, a translator is therefore suggested to make it in a simple way by conveying the main meaning of the original sentence or text. Let us look at the following example.

##### Example 7

**ST:** --颠倒黑白?

--我说是黑，谁敢说白?

**TT:** --Frame your son up?

--What if I do? Does anyone dare to question me?

In Example 7, “Frame your son up” is a free translation of “颠倒黑白” for brevity of the language by giving up the metaphoric images of the colors of black and white. As for the second sentence said by Xiao Han, “我说是黑，谁敢说白”, which informs us that nobody dares fight him, even if what he has said is not correct or what he has done is wrong; in other words, he admits that he has framed his son up. Here we use “do” here to replace the phrase “frame your son up” by following the English pragmatic principle of avoiding repetition. Here is another example:

##### Example 8

**ST:** 一个个过的水深火热的，竟然没人救他们。

**TT:** They're living in an abyss of suffering, but no one wants to save them.

In Example 8, there is a four-character idiom ---- “水深火热”, which means that certain people are experiencing untold suffering, seeming to be living in deep water and scorching fire. Evidently the original sentence is talking in a figurative way. A literal translation of the idiom would be too long to be appropriate for the comic strip utterance, thus the metaphoric images of deep water and hot fire have to be discarded here and replaced roughly by a similar image *abyss*.

In the Chinese comic strip, some four-character structures are modelled after a set idiom, that is to say, the structures are products of parody. Here is an example:

## Example 9

**ST:** 死无对证，谁能证明不是萧寒色令智昏？

**TT:** The dead cannot give witness. Who can prove Xiao Han was innocent?

In the example above, the Chinese expression “色令智昏” is coined after the idiom 利令智昏, which means “be blinded by lust for money or gain”, and 酒令智昏 (when wine is in, wit is out.) is another similar parody. The meaning of the phrase “色令智昏” is “lose one’s mind due to lust for beauty”. In this context, Jiang Qian, the regent, wants to get dirt on Xiao Han by slandering him that he molested the concubine and then killed her out of his lust for her beauty. As the original sentence is in the form of a negative question, which can be understood as “Who can prove that it’s not Xiao Han that lost his mind due to lust for beauty, and molested the woman?”. In other words, the speaker is questioning who can prove Xiao Han is innocent. Accordingly, the whole sentence was finally translated as above.

#### 4.2 Translation of Culture-loaded Words

Since *My Dear Highness* is a sort of romance and its wording is similar to our everyday language, as the author has used some catchphrases and internet buzzwords in the text. All these words have to be handled carefully in translation. As we know, any communicative action or interaction, whether verbal or nonverbal, is conducted under specific cultural context. It is normally for some expressions to be culture-specific and culture-loaded. In the translation of culture-loaded words, one must first understand the communicative function of the source text before he or she can come up with a suitable version that will help elicit a similar response from target audiences. Here some relevant examples will be discussed.

## Example 10

ST: ---- 学生萧止，见过夫子。

---- 一表人才，礼数周到，倒是跟你很像啊。

---- 夫子谬赞了。

TT: ---- Mr. Ye, I’m Xiao Zhi.

---- A fine-looking and polite young man. He is like you.

---- Thank you.

In the example above, the noun “夫子” and the verb “谬赞” are ancient Chinese with rich cultural connotations. “夫子” is supposed to be used by the students to call their teachers with respect in ancient times. And the word “谬赞”, which literally means *I do not deserve such praise*, was used to show one’s good manners and modesty in reply to compliments in ancient China. Such practice is obviously different from both western and modern Chinese conventions. “Despite the undeniable universality of the human condition, there are of course also subtle if crucial differences in cultural preferences, mentalities and values that need to be known to the translator when he or she embarks on a covert

translation and sees the need to apply a cultural filter.” (House, 2006) As a result, in translation of such elements, we employed the skill of free translation by giving up the cultural connotations yet restoring the reading experience to the greatest possible extent.

As we know, culture-loaded words sometimes do have important communicative value in cultural transmission. There are occasions, in which a translator tries to preserve the exotic style of the original work so as to meet the target readers’ psychological expectation of knowing foreign culture through reading the translated version. There are other times when the cognitive difference between English-speakers and Chinese people might occasionally influence the way in which a translator handles a particular object. Nevertheless, when conveying the information of the original text, he or she has to consider the reader’s reading experience and acceptability. What we mean here is that when a literal translation would damage the integrity of the target language or fail to convey the original message, or when it conflicts with the cognition of the target readers, we as translators have to choose appropriate translation method in a creative way. Here are two examples below:

#### Example 11

**ST:** 他还有这样的身手？！

**TT:** He knows *kung fu*?

A literal translation of the culture-loaded word “身手” (body and hand) in Example 11 may cause difficulties for a target reader to understand, meanwhile its deeper meaning is difficult to be explained clearly within the limited text box, hence we may adopt the strategy of foreignization and change it into a more popular Chinese term *kung fu*, which is also known to some westerners.

#### Example 12

**ST:** 大哥，你不疼吗？

**TT:** Aren't you hurt? Man!

In Example 12, the addressing term “大哥” is a polysemous word with four meanings: husband, the eldest brother, the eldest son, and an elder brother. But here in this comic strip, it is clear that the two characters are not relatives and the word “大哥” is a vocative which is frequently used in daily life. Obviously a literal translation of the term would be inappropriate; instead, “man”, an expression with a similar meaning, can be a perfect match, both cognitively and culturally.

## 5. Conclusion

In an image-rich multimodal discourse such as a comic strip, visual mode plays an important role in the construction of meaning, and is interactive with speech to convey intended meaning of a text. A translator is supposed to handle well the complementary relationship between images and speech, as



they refer to different dimensions of meanings. Nowadays, translation of comic strips is making its due contribution to the diffusion of Chinese stories. And such stories in the form of comic strips have established themselves as a critical medium for inter-cultural communication, promoting better understanding between different nations and cultures. As more and more Chinese comics and animation products tap into the foreign market, it is reasonable to believe that how to better translate such products is worth further research.

## References

- Borodo, M. (2015). Multimodal, translation and comics. *Taylor & Francis Online*, 23(1), 22-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2013.876057>
- Haase, J., & Stöckl, H. (1998). Action-theoretical concepts for dictionaries on the Internet. *International Journal for Language Data Processing*, 22(2), 5-37.
- House, J. (2006). Text and context in translation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 38(3), 338-358. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2005.06.021>
- Kaindl, K., (1999). Thump, Whizz, Poom: A Framework for the Study of Comics under Translation. *Target*, 11(2), 263-288. <https://doi.org/10.1075/target.11.2.05kai>
- Kaindl, K. (2004). *Übersetzungswissenschaft im interdisziplinären Dialog: Am Beispiel der Comicübersetzung*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg.
- Kress, G. (2010). *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. London: Routledge.
- Malinowski, B. (1935). *Coral Gardens and Their Magic (II)*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Martinec, R., & Salway, A. (2005). A System for Image-Text Relations in New (and Old) Media. *Visual Communication*, 4(3), 337-371. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357205055928>
- Striver, I. (2022, February 22). *Line Length & Column Width*. Retrieved May 21, 2022, from <https://www.fonts.com/cotent/learning/level-2/text-typography/length-column-width>
- The University of Manchester. (2022, February 22). *Multimodality in Translation and Interpreting Studies*. Retrieved May 21, 2022, from <https://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/ctis/research/themes/multimodality>
- Ako Culture: My Dear Highness!*. (2021, May 12). Retrieved September 19, 2021, from <https://ac.qq.com/Comic/comicInfo/id/647973> (in Chinese)
- Wu, Y. (2021). A study of multimodal translation under the media turn. *Journal of Shanghai International Studies University*, 44(1), 115-123. (in Chinese)