

# On Translator's Cultural Orientation — A Comparative Study of the Translation of *Hong Lou Meng*

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## Abstract

The study of translation is the study of cultural interaction. The cross-cultural awareness, one of the basic qualifications for a translator, influences the translator's translation strategies, approaches, and the translation quality. Based on the comparison between the two outstanding English versions of *Hong Lou Meng*, this article tries to explore how the Chinese and English translators, Yang Xianyi and David Hawkes put their emphasis on the author or the potential readers, the source language culture or the target language culture. This study also helps to see more clearly the nature of translation, and the relation among translation, translator, and culture.

**Key words:** Translation, cultural orientation, translator, source language culture, target language culture.

## I. The Nature of Translation

In a broad sense, translation involves the cultural interflow between two branches that have different languages. In a narrow sense, translation refers to the transmission of information between two languages: the source language and the target language. As Nida refers it, translation consists in reproducing in the target language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of the source language message and second in terms of its special qualities. Translating must aim primarily at reproducing the message. Meaning should be given priority. Translation is the very thing that bridges over any language barrier between two cultures. The study of translation is the study of cultural interaction.

In recent years, translation has been taken as a cross-cultural activity in the translation circle. People have reached the consensus that translation is not only the transmission of information of different languages, but also of different cultures. However, there has existed a heated discussion on how to handle the cultural factors in translation.

## II. Translator's Cultural Orientation

The cultural turn in translation studies after the 1970s brought about new dimensions and approaches for translation studies. More and more translators and translation theorists have come to realize that a translator is the subjectivity of translation and important in the construction and transferring of cultures when rendering.

A translator stands at the center of a dynamic process of communication, as a mediator between different cultures. The major task of a translator is to turn the cultural content in one language into another, so whether it is faithful or not largely depends on the degrees of the translator's grasp of both views of languages and cultures.

Though translating is a consultant process of two or more cultures, it is not necessarily to say a translator stands in a neutral position between cultures. As translating involves a conflict of interests, translators' own culture-specific knowledge and the concepts of their own culture will inevitably be embedded in his or her translation selection and translation approaches.

Source language culture-orientated translation or target language culture-orientated translation may be the two basic orientations or choices for a translator in confronting with culture factors when rendering.

## III. Comparative Analysis of the Ritual & Custom Translation of *Hong Lou Meng*

*Hong Lou Meng*, the great classical Chinese novel written in the mid-eighteenth century during the reign

of Emperor Qian-long of the Qing Dynasty, has been widely popular throughout the last two centuries. It has been regarded as "the Encyclopedia of the Feudal Society of China" for the vast sphere of the cultural contents, including Chinese allusions, rituals and customs, dressing, instruments and household devices, architecture, gardening, food, medicine, official titles, religion, poems, plays, games, geographic elements, arts, music elements, festivals, and so on.

### 1. Brief Introduction to the Two English Versions and Their Translators

There are two outstanding English versions of *Hong Lou Meng*, namely *A Dream of Red Mansions* by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang and *The Story of the Stone* by David Hawkes and John Minford. Yang Xianyi is a great Chinese translator and expert of foreign literature, who takes *faithfulness* as the first thing when rendering. He also thinks there can be some foreign flavors in translation. David Hawkes, an English Sinologist, persisted in rendering everything of the original and emphasized that a translator should be responsible for the author, the readers, and the source text. It is no easy job to translate a great work like *Hong Lou Meng*, especially in the culture aspect. Holding different cultures, the two translators have different attitudes and orientations in handling the source text.

### 2. A Comparative Analysis of the Two Versions

In this part, 97 ritual & custom translation cases, which appear in the first 80 chapters of the novel and are more typical and alien to foreigners, have been taken for discussion.

#### 2.1 Analysis of the Similarities of the Two Versions

**First**, sometimes Yang Xianyi and David Hawkes even have used exactly the same words as in the following examples.

(1) 冲一冲也好 (p.135) 冲

"If I were you I'd make ready the things for the funeral. That may *break the bad luck*." (Yang Vol.1:118)

You'll have to start getting things ready for the end. Of course, it's always possible that doing so may *break the bad luck*. (Hawkes Vol.1: 241)

(2) "你既吃了我们家的茶,怎么还不给我们家作媳妇儿?" (p.295) 吃茶

*Drink our family's tea*, a daughter-in-law to be! (Yang Vol.1: 365)

You know the rule: "*drink the family's tea* · the family's bride-to-be." (Hawkes Vol.1: 499)

**Second**, surprisingly, 40 among the 97 ritual and custom translation cases, Yang and David have applied the same translation approach or strategy, either with alienation or adaptation, literal or free translation, semantic or communicative translation. E.g.

- (3) 我想他两家也就算门当户对了。(p.937)  
门当户对

Communicative translation:

I thought *the two families being fairly well matched*. (Yang Vol.2: 548)

Communicative translation:

...but I thought that as *the families were so obviously suited*. (Hawkes Vol.3: 426)

**Third**, both translators have tried to keep the original cultural flavor.

- (4) 仍旧带着项圈、宝玉、寄名锁、护身符等物。  
(p.36) 寄名锁、护身符

...and he still wore the torque, the precious jade, a lock shaped amulet containing his Buddhistic name, and a lucky charm... (Yang Vol.1: 47)

In the translation, Yang uses the word *Buddhistic* that identifies Pao-yu as a Buddhist rather than a Christian.

- (5) 守灵、供饭、供茶、随起举哀。(p.156)  
守灵、随起举哀

You will also take turns by the spirit tablet, making offerings of rice and tea, kowtowing when the visitors *kowtow*, wailing when they wail. (Hawkes Vol.1: 272)

The word *kowtow* has much Chinese cultural deposit.

## 2.2 Analysis of the Distinctions of the Two Translation Versions

According to the comparison, the following conclusion can be easily drawn.

**First**, Hawkes offered many more words and much more detailed explanation in his translation. This can be clearly illustrated in the following examples.

- (6) 问他二人年庚。(p.294) 年庚

Write *the eight characters of their horoscopes* on these two figures. (Yang Vol.1: 364)

She instructed her to write *the eight symbols of her victims' nativity—two for the year, two for the month, two for the day and two for the hour—on each of the human figures*. (Hawkes Vol.1: 498)

- (7) 请任摔丧驾灵之任。(p. 148) 摔丧、驾灵

...and take *the chief mourner's part*... (Yang Vol.1: 179)

...and perform *the chief mourner's duties of smashing the bowl when the bearers came in to take up the coffin and walking in front of it in the funeral procession*. (Hawkes Vol.1: 261)

In the preface of *The Story of The Stone*, David Hawkes once said:

"I make no apology for having occasionally amplified the text a little in order to make such

passages intelligible. The alternative would have been to explain them in footnotes; and though footnotes are all very well in their place, reading a heavily annotated novel would seem to me rather like trying to play tennis in chains.

But these occasional small amplifications are not the only departures I have made from the available texts. For the benefit of the learned reader I ought perhaps to explain that this translation in effect represents a new edition of my own. For reasons which I shall endeavor to make clear, I do not think it is possible for a modern translator to follow any of the existing versions without deviating from it occasionally."

Obviously, David Hawkes knew well that cultural factors in *Hong Lou Meng* are alien and strange to the western readers since the potential readers do not possess the cultural background of the source text readers. Therefore, David Hawkes amplified the text to help the target text readers with the understanding of Chinese cultures.

**Second**, sometimes the two translators use different translation strategies in their translation. Yang, as a Chinese translator, more or less adopted the Chinese traditional translation norms, and he used more literal and semantic translation. What is more, Yang tried to present the Chinese traditional culture to the West by using alienation in translation practice. Hawkes used more adaptation and free translation than Yang. E.g.

- (8) 只见王夫人的丫鬟金钏儿和那一个才留头的小女孩儿站在台阶儿上玩呢。(p81) 留头

Literal translation/alienation

On the *verandah* steps there, Lady Wang's maid Chinchuan was playing with a girl who had just *let her hair grow*. (Yang Vol.1: 102)

Free translation/adaptation

As she reached the gate of the Court, she came upon Lady Wang's maid, Golden, playing on the front steps with *a young girl*. (Hawkes Vol.1: 167)

Generally speaking, semantic translation is briefer and more literal than communicative translation. Semantic translation is written at the author's linguistic level, while communicative at the readership's. Opinions swung between semantic and communicative translation, literal and free, adaptation and alienation, depend on whether the bias was to be in favor of the author or the reader, the source or the target language text and culture.

Literal and free translations are translation techniques, while alienation and adaptation are translation strategies that are involved usually in a cultural perspective in translation practice. Strategy directs techniques. With the translation strategies, translators choose suitable translation techniques.

**Third**, Hawkes focused more on the target culture readers. Different culture backgrounds in which the

translators have been brought up influence their translation. As an English translator, Hawkes focused more on the target culture readers than Yang did. E.g. (9) 等满了孝再圆房儿。(p.892) 圆房

Once the mourning is over she can *live with my husband*. (Yang Vol.2: 487)

...until the mourning period is over and she is allowed to *sleep with Lian*. (Hawkes Vol.3: 352)

Interestingly, the two translators have used two different verbs to translate the Chinese 圆房. Yang's translation is indirect; however, Hawkes' translation is straightforward and conveys more explicit information to the target culture readers.

#### IV. Conclusion

To sum up, the analysis of the ritual & custom translation cases in the two English versions of *Hong Lou Meng* leads to the conclusion that both Yang Xianyi and David Hawkes are faithful to the original text. Hawkes' translation is more or less target language culture-orientated with more adaptation used. However, as an English translator, in reproducing the original cultural elements, he still turned to target language cultural-orientated translation.

The tendency of translation will be to keep faithful to the original author, the original text and the original culture. With the increasing international communication and the improvement of the comprehension of the target receptors, translation will be promoted as more source language culture-orientated.

Translators of Chinese literary works, like *Hong Lou Meng*, should bear in mind the responsibility for introducing Chinese cultural heritage to the target readers. This is not only of necessity but also of possibility, as has been proved by the practice of the Yang's and David Hawkes.

In cross-culture translation, proper and increasing attention should be paid to translator's cultural orientation and subjectivity of translator so as to preserve the source culture of the source text.

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