

Strategies for Translating Chinese Colloquial Expressions into English in Science Fiction: A Case Study of English Version of the *Three-body Problem*

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Abstract: In recent years, Liu Cixin's trilogy the *Three-body Problem*, a science fiction novel, has broken the monopoly of foreign science fiction, won massive and popular reviews and admiration from Chinese and foreign readers, and has become an important source for Chinese culture to "go global". To some extent, the result of English translation of science fiction has relatively affected its spread abroad. In the context of cultural differences, in order to enable overseas readers to correctly feel and understand the cultural elements of Chinese science fiction, it is necessary to properly convey specific meaning specially owned by cultural specific words during translation. Based on this, this paper takes the *Three-body Problem* as a source text, and through the analysis of examples, studies the English translation strategies of colloquial expressions, hoping to facilitate promoting the quality of translation work.

Keywords: *Three-body Problem*, Colloquial expressions, Translation strategy.

1. Introduction

The concept of science fiction was created by Hugo Gensback at the earliest. In the late Qing Dynasty, progressive talents such as Liang Qichao and Lu Xun saw the value of such novels in spreading scientific knowledge and cheering up the China's national spirit, and translated them into Chinese for the first time. For more than 100 years since science fiction entered China, Chinese versions of foreign science fiction have been the nutrients and lighthouse for domestic science fiction. Until, the first part of *Three Bodies* by Liu Cixin, a Chinese novelist of science fiction, was translated by Chinese American writer Liu Yukun and won the 73rd Hugo Award, and was nominated for the 2014 Nebula Award, Chinese science fiction elements suddenly stepped onto the international stage over one night. So the success of the English version of the *Three-body Problem* can be seen. It is obvious that excellent science fiction has increasingly become an important and notable driving force for one culture to participate in the society of world culture, and the high level of English translation of science fiction is an important guarantee for the spread of domestic fiction overseas.

The translator should give full play to his subjective initiative and weigh the fidelity of the translation, the appropriateness of expression and the aesthetic sense of style (Liu 2014:274). Naturally, the study of English translation of science fiction has been attracting more and more attention from Chinese scholars since then. According statistics in CNKI where stores sufficient collections of domestic and foreign researches, the research objects of English translation of science fiction in China include the introduction and description of the history of translating foreign science fiction into Chinese, culture loaded words, brand new words, cultural exclusives, "hijacking" phenomenon, etc. The research contents include the communication ability of Chinese science fiction abroad, English translation strategies, explicit features, gender studies in translation of science fiction, etc. Research methods include statistics, review, review, corpus

research, etc. Also for research theories, such as cultural translation, feminist translation, semantic translation, communicative translation and so on, all involved among China's research on the English translation of science fiction.

These studies have produced positive significance for local science fiction literature to go global. Among them, the English version of *Three Bodies* occupies an key and inspiring position in the development of translated Chinese works, and in return, China's scholars on science fiction translation studies consistently and comprehensively pay much attention to its research for a better carry out after. However, in the study of translation strategies, China's scholars do not pay enough attention to different types of cultural specific items. Thus, taking the English version of the *Three-body Problem* as an example, this paper makes an in-depth study of the translation strategies of colloquial expressions in the work by means of case analysis, with a view to providing reference for English translators of Chinese science fiction.

2. Literature References

2.1. Research on English Translation of Science Fiction in China

The Hugo Prize has stimulated the research enthusiasm of the domestic academic community for China's local science fiction. Since 2015, foreign translation research has emerged, with English translation as the main research object (Gao Qian, Wang Xiaohui, 2021).

Based on the search results of CNKI, the author generally classifies the Chinese research on the English translation of domestic science fiction works into three categories: the research on the review of the translation process of science fiction works and the research on the translation communication ability (Wang Xueming and Liu Yi, 2015; Wang Yawen, 2019; Liang Haowen, 2019; Gao Qian and Wang Xiaohui, 2021; Wang Xueming, 2022) Feminist translation studies (Lv Xiaofei, 2017; Que Chunhua, Wu Yazhi, 2019) as well as English translation strategies from

different theoretical perspectives (Chen Jiansheng, Wang Qilei, 2017; Wang Yi, 2018; Jia Di, He Ying, 2020; Zheng Yubin, 2022).

First of all, Wang Xueming (2015) reviewed the development of science fiction translation in the past hundred years. China's science fiction translation has experienced several climaxes and finally ushered in spring. Against this background, she emphasized that the current research on science fiction translation is still on the margins of neglect, hoping to draw attention to the English translation and introduction of domestic science fiction. Gao Qian (2021) and other scholars focused on the development of English translation of science fiction since the 20th century, analyzed the influencing factors behind the translation and introduction boom, and provided some inspiration for the subsequent overseas dissemination of Chinese science fiction.

Different scholars try to look at the translated works and problems within from possible perspectives. For example, with the development of feminism, the portrayal of female characters in English versions of science fiction has attracted the attention of scholars. Lv Xiaofei (2017) believes that the current research on feminist translation is limited to the analysis of the Chinese versions of foreign classic literary works, and all of them ignore the feminist translation consciousness of male translators to varying degrees. The "hijacking" translation strategy of *Three Bodies* successfully represents the feminist consciousness, which is a good case for promoting the development of feminist translation theory in China.

The last category is the research on cultural exclusives. Scholar Wang Yi (2018) used the research method of combining statistics and case analysis to analyze the translation strategies of cultural exclusives in the translation of science fiction *Three Bodies*, and made statistics and classification on the specific strategies used in the English translation of cultural exclusives in the research process. With the same focus on cultural translation, Zheng Yubin (2022), by presenting a collection of culture loaded words and the according translation strategies of *Three Bodies*, discussed the foreignization and domestication of translating culture loaded words from the perspective of cultural translation. He made five categories of ecological culture, social culture, material culture, ideological culture and language culture. However, in terms of both quantity and depth of those analysis, the above scholars' research on the translation strategies of cultural specific items is not quite enough.

2.2. Research on the Translation Strategies of Colloquial Expressions

The colloquial expressions (You, Zhang, 2004) are popular and widely popular sentences, which is concise and visualized. Most of them are expressions from the working people's life experience and wishes, and contains rich cultural information. Colloquial expressions, as a linguistic feature of China, its translation study has been receiving extensive attention. Scholars in China who study the English translation of colloquial expressions mostly use case studies or comparative studies to study the methods and strategies of the translation from varied perspectives, such as cultural translation, translation ethics and functional translation.

For example, Xue (2017) weighed his thinking on exploring the translation techniques of colloquial expressions involving the increase or reduction of sentence components,

the flexible adjustments of fixed phrases in English as well as separation of complex colloquial expressions. Wen (2018), who took a guidance from translation norms theory by Gideon Toury, regarded three aspects differentiate the Chinese and West culture that are the differences of way of thinking, regional culture and the cultivation of unique history. Then, common translation techniques for colloquial expressions were mentioned and described with cases before conclusion in which he calls for a mediate control to be achieved by translators between translation adequacy and translation acceptability. However, most of studies choose China's traditional literature as source text such as *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *Outlaws of the Marsh*, and the research on the English translation of colloquial expressions in science fiction is relatively limited.

In addition, domestic scholars pay special attention to the problems occurred and to be solved in colloquial translation. Liu Ning (2016), a scholar, believes that Chinese colloquial expressions are a kind of inheritance of folk culture. In the process of translation, influenced by its own cultural form and historical factors, there is a certain cultural deficiency in the translation of Chinese colloquial expressions. Wu and He (2019) believes that the translator's retention and change of culture loaded words and cultural images can reflect translation strategies and his own translation views. Therefore, we take the translator's translation of cultural specific items or image discourse of the original text as the object of study to differentiate translation strategies. Therefore, it is of practical significance and research value to analyze the translation cases and translation strategies of colloquial expressions in science fiction works, which can improve the translation quality of science fiction works in terms of language and culture.

In this context, this paper makes a case study of the colloquial expressions and their translation strategies in the book *Three-body Problem*, summarizes the English translation strategies of colloquial expressions in science fiction texts, and protects the intrinsic value and culture of colloquial expressions.

3. Case Analysis of the Translation of Colloquial Expressions

In this part, seven typical cases of colloquial expressions, including idioms and slang mainly, will be presented along with through analysis from cultural translation perspective for exploring its according English translation strategies.

Chinese Text 1: “嗤，警方算个狗屁，上帝来了都没用，现在全人类已经到了‘叫天天不答，叫地地不应’的地步了。”

English Text 1: Wei smiled contemptuously. “The police are worthless. Even if God were here, it wouldn't do any good. The entire human race has reached the point where no one is listening to their prayers.”

In China's folk culture, people believe that there are supernaturals in the sky and some also under the earth, so they pray to the sky and the earth for protection and hope that they can tide over the difficulties smoothly. Obviously, Chinese culture and American culture have different definitions of supernaturals or immortals. “天” and “地” in this sentence are unique to Chinese culture, and no corresponding nouns in English can be found. However, the beloved immortals of any country should listen to the prayers of the people. Therefore,

by minimizing difference and aiming for the common knowing, the translator adopts domestication translation strategy and free translation method to translate “天” and “地” into “no one”, and uses the word “prayers” to show the similarities between Chinese culture and Western cultures, making it easier for American readers to accept the tone of story-telling and the response of the original readers and readers from western cultures could be mostly the same.

In this case, facing the cultural differences in the English translation of an idiom, the translator does not struggle with how to explain the differences, but reflects the similarities between Chinese culture and Western cultures, and then activates the target readers’ cognitive model under the domestication strategy.

Chinese Text 2: “...他有奶便是娘...!”

English Text 2: “..., He would serve any master who dangled money in front of him...”

The original meaning of the idiom “有奶便是娘” is that children will recognize the person who feeds them milk as mother of their own, regardless of whether she is their mother or not. The implication behind it is to satirize those who only care about interests, but do not care about friendship or the truth. In American culture, there are also idiom with similar meanings. The relevant expression is “dangle carrots in front of someone”, so the translator directly adopts the domestication translation strategy here. However, due to the reasonable concern about the context, the translator changed the carrot into money, and more frankly pointed out that the interest here in context is money.

This case enlightens translator that in the process of translating colloquial expressions into English, if there are similar expressions in the target language culture, partial literal translation will not lose the original meaning of the colloquial expressions, but may possibly help readers understand the plot.

Chinese Text 3: “人文环境呢? 同志, 不要只想着技术方面, 看这里穷的, 知道吗? 穷山恶水出刁民, 将来与地方上的关系怕有很大麻烦, 说不定, 基地会成了这儿的唐僧肉。”

English Text 3: “What about the human environment? Comrades, don’t just focus on the technical side. Look at how poor this place is. The poorer a village, the craftier the people...”

In this example, there is an idiom: “穷山恶水出刁民” (Literal Meaning: The poor mountains and the evil waters produce the unruly people). This proverb has a certain cultural background. Once upon a time in China, every village in a relatively remote place was very poor and often coveted the money of passers-by. Therefore, this idiom is actually used to describe that residents in regions with extremely backward economies are often untrustworthy. Although the story behind the saying was happening in the poor days of China, the objective law embodied in this saying can be understood by all people across most regions and cultural patterns. Therefore, the translator adopts the translation strategy of domestication by replacing the original idiom into an English idiom that was also adjusted flexibly according to context. or foreignization, that is, you can use the literal translation method under the to make the meaning of idioms in the target language intuitive and clear.

Actually, with such a similar thinking pattern existed in this case, literal translation strategy with translation techniques would also do charms in translating, for it could bring out the Chinese culture favor for readers who at the same time won’t be lost, thanks to the recognizable objective law within.

Chinese Text 4: 大史几乎不为人察觉地摇摇头, “没有合适位置, 那小东西精得能捉鬼, 狙击手的长家伙一瞄准她就会察觉。”

English Text 4: Almost imperceptibly, Da Shi shook his head. “There’s no good position. She’s sharp as a tack. As soon as she’s targeted by a sniper scope, she’ll know.”

“捉鬼” (Literal meaning: catch a ghost) is a Chinese folk slang, in which metaphor is used to describe those unwanted shrewd old man or smart but canny young people. If the translator wants to reflect the literal meaning in the translation, the reader may be confused in this case. If the translator uses the translation method of intra text annotation to explain on this basis, it is predictable to make the structure redundant and the meaning group fragmented. Therefore, in view of the large difference between the literal meaning and the implied meaning, the translator directly adopts the domestication strategy and free translation method to ensure the readability of the translated text.

Chinese Text 5: “别误会, 我要是直直开过去不就完了, 讲个礼貌打个招呼你还当成驴肝肺了。”

English Text 5: “Now, don’t misunderstand me. I could have just driven past you, but instead, I chose to be polite and stop to greet you. You’re making being nice a thankless task.”

In the real life scene, life experience has a growing and profound impact on language. Because “驴肝肺” (the liver and lungs of donkeys) are cheap and not tasty at all, they are disliked by Chinese diners. Over time, people have given a new concept to “驴肝肺”, that is, something that is not welcomed. Though, this slang appeared in traditional Chinese literature for the first time, but because it originally came from common people’s life, this expression is mostly found in conversation from novels and other less formal situation. Due to the cultural differences between China and the West, American readers firstly do not know much about the stories behind them, and then even have doubts about China’s popular taste of eating animal viscera, which may affect the reading experience. In order to avoid potential cultural conflict, the translator adopts domestication translation strategy and free translation method. As we can see, cultural gap can be trap of understanding in translation works, translators had better take domestication strategy for acceptability.

Chinese Text 6: “怎么样老弟, 扛不住了吧? 我说你不成吧, 你还硬充六根脚趾头。”

English Text 6: “So how’s it going, buddy? Finding it hard to bear? I said you couldn’t handle it. And you insisted on playing the tough guy.”

A human foot has five toes, making he who has the sixth toes are deformed, which represents the difference. Therefore, “硬充六根脚趾头” is a mockery of people who overestimate their strength and pretend to be wise. However, although the saying describes people’s arrogance by a metaphor about six toes, the real cultural connotation behind it has deviated from the phenomenon of deformity, and it is not a sneer at the disabled. When dealing with cultural concepts that are

proprietary to China and not derived from world common conceptions, the translator once again adopts domestication translation strategies and free translation methods to avoid cultural misunderstanding.

Source Text 7: “没了，有的时候我再告诉你，手机要一直开着。老弟，可得站直喽！害怕的时候就想想我那条终极定理。”

Target Text 7: “No. But if I find out more I’ll let you know. Keep your phone on, buddy. Keep your head screwed on straight, and if you get scared again, just remember my ultimate rule.”

“站直喽”，a Chinese slang, referring to ask someone to stand straight literally, actually is used to encourage people to carry on and don’t lose guts but be prepared for whatever terrible or horrible is confronting. The translator well knew the rich hidden impersonal meaning behind this slang, and he took domestication strategy by adopting an English idiom with the same implied meaning, which fully conveyed the structural and semantic significance of the original text in English text.

4. Translation Strategy for Chinese Colloquial Expressions

First of all, translating Chinese colloquial expressions into English has certain challenges. As far as the content is concerned, most of the idioms in Chinese culture come from the working people of China, which embodies the wisdom they have learned from their production and life experience. The idioms have cultural exclusivity, and the cultural images in the idioms may be missing or unequal in the target language, which requires the translator to first have a basic judgment on Chinese and English cultures before translation. In terms of form, most colloquial expressions are not only short and concise, but also often embodied in metaphor, exaggeration, contrast and other rhetorical devices. These rhetorical devices help to portray characters and promote the development of the plot, which is also valuable function of colloquial expressions. For this, the translator should not only master the original meaning of idioms or slang, but also use translation creativity to reflect their functions, so that the translation can accurately and completely reflect the source text context, and try not to lose the style of the original, and the latter is difficult to operate.

Through the analysis of the examples from the *Three-body Problem*, the author finds the following two points: First, due to the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, there will be Chinese specific cultural concepts that do not originate from common life experiences or large differences between the literal meaning and the implied meaning of idioms in the English translation of colloquial expressions. When Foreign readers do not know much about the stories behind them, they may even have doubts or even reject some cultural phenomena, it affects the reading experience. At this time, in order to avoid potential cultural conflicts, translators often adopt domestication translation strategies and free translation methods, which are also the most common translation strategies in the English translation of colloquial expressions in the *Three-body Problem*.

Second, some of the colloquial expressions come from the common life experience of human beings or the accepted objective laws. At that time, the colloquial expressions just

reflect the common points of human cultures which have crossed regions and cultural forms, and can be understood by all people. Then the translator can adopt the translation strategy of domestication, foreignization or both combined by considering adopting part of the literal translation method under the domestication translation strategy according to the particularity of the colloquial expressions. A combined strategy of domestication and foreignization shows the cultural characteristics of China and brings a novel reading experience to the English readers.

5. Conclusion

The research on the English translation of Chinese science fiction mainly includes the research on the development history of the English translation of science fiction, the research on English translation strategies from different perspectives as well as the research on the English translation of cultural specific items, among which the further research on the language aspect in cultural specific items is insufficient.

This paper takes the colloquial expressions in *Three-body Problem* as the research object, and studies the English translation strategies of such words by case analysis. For colloquial expressions in Chinese works to be translated into English, domestication is the first choice to avoid cultural misunderstanding and potential cultural conflict for idioms that are culturally specific and difficult to understand. However, for the colloquial expressions that embody cultural commonalities and human objective laws, it can be considered that part of them should be translated directly on the basis of domestication translation strategies to reflect the characteristics of the source language and bring readers a novel reading experience from cultural diversity.

Last, this paper still has limitations on its adequacy for cases analysis, hoping more cases of colloquial expressions can be researched in the other two books of *Three-body Problem*.

Acknowledgment

As a post graduate student majoring in English translation, I have always been paying attention to the strategy and methods during individual translation process. It is undoubted that every translation practice could be unique and characteristics, but still, some lessons or even pieces of deep thinking from translation experiences gradually flowed up and expose themselves after translation log or summaries. Those are what we cherish, are hopes, rewards and also the reason why translators are willing to seek truth and continue to push the research forward.

During the process, I would like to express my gratitude firstly to all the teachers and classmates who have helped me in my study and life. The most important is that I could not have finished the paper smoothly without their spirit. I hope that all warm-hearted and studious students can achieve what they want and all embrace wonderful lives. Then, I would also like to thank my family and friends who have supported me along the way so that I can persevere when I encounter difficulties.

At last, translation strategy is a consisting topic along with the changes of readers’ demand which relates with more complex factors, I will keep following the realistic translation problem occurred in other Chinese works in English versions, hoping to present people speaking English with beautiful

Chinese stories.

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