

Study on the English Translation Techniques of Four-Character Idioms in *Fortress Besieged* from the Perspective of Toury's Translation Norms Theory

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Abstract: This paper explores the English translation of four-character idioms in *Fortress Besieged* from the perspective of Toury's translation norms theory. Focusing on the version by Jeanne Kelly and Nathan K. Mao, it analyzes translation techniques under preliminary, initial, and operational norms, including addition, omission, structural adjustment, and cultural transformation. This study not only helps to deepen the understanding of Toury's translation norms theory, but also provides a useful reference for the theory and practice of English translation of Chinese literary work.

Keywords: Toury's Translation Norms Theory, *Fortress Besieged*, English Translation of Four-Character Idioms.

1. Introduction

Fortress Besieged, Qian Zhongshu's masterpiece, is celebrated for its distinctive language and profound cultural depth. The novel employs numerous four-character idioms, which embody the rhythmic elegance of Chinese while conveying rich cultural meaning. However, translating these idioms poses significant challenges, particularly in preserving their form, meaning, and stylistic effects.

Gideon Toury's translation norms theory offers a systematic framework for analyzing such challenges, particularly through its preliminary, initial, and operational norms. This study examines the English translation of *Fortress Besieged* by Jeanne Kelly and Nathan K. Mao, exploring their strategies for rendering four-character idioms under Toury's theoretical lens. The findings reveal that the translators employ techniques such as addition, omission, structural adjustment and conversion to balance fidelity and readability.

This research not only enhances understanding of Toury's norms but also provides insights for translating Chinese literary works into English.

2. Literature Review

Four-character idioms, with their symmetrical structure, rhythmic phonetics, and condensed language, are essential carriers of Chinese cultural heritage and hold significant importance in linguistic and literary art (Lin Juan, 2024:19). As Chinese culture gains global influence, the translation of these idioms has attracted scholarly attention. Studies have increased in number, focusing on translation strategies in various texts, such as government reports and literary works (Kang Yue, 2022:2220).

Domestic scholars emphasize preserving cultural specificity and aesthetic resonance in translation. Zhang Peiji (2008:7) advocates balancing faithfulness and readability through methods like direct translation, free translation, and addition. Foreign scholars, such as Chien Lynn and Harris Randy Allen [2] (2010:159), highlight the idioms' unique "form of emphasis," while Mona Baker (1992) stresses

balancing "formal equivalence" and "dynamic equivalence." Lawrence Venuti (1995) supports "foreignization" to retain source-language cultural traits. However, challenges remain in balancing cultural fidelity and target-reader acceptance.

Toury's translation norms theory, proposed by Gideon Toury, categorizes norms into preliminary, initial, and operational norms (Zhang Xuyin, 2017:83). Domestic scholars like Lu Aiyu (2024:151) view translation as a norm-governed cross-cultural practice, while Zhang Rong (2024:22) emphasizes its socio-cultural constructed nature. Huang Jiahui (2024:18) explores the balance between acceptability (target-oriented) and adequacy (source-oriented). Internationally, Andrew Chesterman [1] (1997) develops Toury's theory into a "translation modelling" framework, and Theo Hermans [5] (1999) highlights its socio-cultural perspective. Jeremy Munday [4] (2001) notes that norms reflect cultural values, requiring translators to adapt to target-language expectations. However, Gideon Toury's operational norms, such as augmentation and omission, lack clear boundaries[3] (Gideon Toury, 1980:54).

Current translations of four-character idioms in *Fortress Besieged* largely convey the original's essence, yet cultural gaps sometimes lead to simplification or omission, diminishing the text's richness (Chen Ying, 2011:34). Few studies apply Toury's norms to analyze these idioms. This paper fills that gap by examining translation choices under normative constraints and proposing adjustments to enhance literary translation.

3. Theoretical Framework

Toury's translation norms theory proposes that translation activities are subject to three types of norms, namely preliminary norms, initial norms and operational norms. These norms are the conventions that translators follow by default in a particular historical and cultural context, reflecting the dynamic interaction between translation activities and the target language culture. The preliminary norms focus on the macroscopic decision-making before translation, such as text selection and translation strategy tendency; the initial norms reflect the translator's tendency to choose between cultural fidelity to the source language and

cultural adaptation to the target language; and the operational norms dominate the specific language conversion and text reconstruction behaviors in the translation process. The three norms together constitute the guiding framework of translation behaviour, which not only constrains the translator's choice, but also provides a systematic perspective for the analysis of the translation phenomenon.

4. Chinese Four-Character Idioms in *Fortress Besieged*

In *Fortress Besieged*, Qian Zhongshu uses a large number of four-character idioms, which not only enrich the linguistic expression of the novel, but also enhance its cultural connotations and artistic charm. The following analyses the characteristics of the four-character idioms from four aspects: form feature, phonological features, expressive effects and cultural connotations.

The first characteristics of the four-character idioms from is form feature. The formal features of four-character idioms are mainly reflected in the symmetry, compactness and logic of their structure. Usually, four-character idioms consist of two two-syllable words, with the front and back parts forming symmetry in structure. This symmetry not only makes idioms look neat and beautiful in form, but also enhances the clarity and logic of their expressions. Besides, the compactness of the idioms makes them more condensed in expression and capable of conveying the richest meaning in the shortest space. The other aspect in form is that with the preceding and following parts echoing each other in meaning to form a complete expression, four-character idioms are usually logically coherent in meaning.

Phonological features are mainly reflected in the two aspects of tonal pattern and rhyme. Tonal contrast (pingze), a fundamental component of Chinese phonology, refers to the regulated alternation between level tones (ping, 平) with sustained resonance and oblique tones (ze, 仄) with dynamic inflection. In four-character idioms, this systematic alternation of tonal patterns creates a cadenced rhythmic effect through its modulated tonal cadence. Rhyme refers to the formation of phonetic echoes at the end of a sentence through the same or similar rhymes. These features not only enhance the artistry of language, but also provide strong support for characterization and plot development.

The use of four-character idioms in *Fortress Besieged*, which has a remarkable expressive effect, enhances the vividness and infectiousness of the language. Firstly, four-character idioms are compact structure and capable of expressing complex thoughts and emotions in the most concise language. This concise and condensed feature makes idioms extremely efficient for expression in literary works. Secondly, four-character idioms are often used to make the language more graphic and vivid through specific imagery or metaphors, leaving a deep impression on the reader. Lastly, through four-character idioms, it expresses satirical or humorous effects, making the language sharper and more expressive.

The last characteristics of four-character is the cultural connotation. They are mainly reflected in their historical allusions and philosophical thoughts. In *Fortress Besieged*, four-character idioms usually contain rich cultural information, such as historical allusions and philosophical thoughts, reflecting the wisdom and values of traditional Chinese culture.

5. Translation Techniques of the Four-Character Idioms in *Fortress Besieged* from the Perspective of Toury's Translation Norms Theory

Based on Toury's translation norms theory and the characteristics of the four-character idioms, this chapter analyses the English translation skills of *Fortress Besieged* from the three perspectives of preliminary norms, initial norms and operational norms, adeptly incorporating five key translation techniques: addition, omission, structural adjustment, conversion and cultural transformation.

5.1. Translation Techniques under the Preliminary Norm

In translation, addition and omission, as important translation techniques, adjust the information density of the source language in order to achieve the pragmatic functional equivalence of the target language. Starting from the framework of preliminary norms, the following analyses the translation techniques of the four-character idioms in *Fortress Besieged*, aiming to reveal the practical value of translation techniques.

5.1.1. Addition

Addition refers to adding certain words, sentences or passages in the translation according to the needs of the target language's lexical, syntactic, semantic, rhetorical or stylistic needs, or due to the constraints of some specific cultural norms of the target language, so as to better express the original thought content, or to better realize a specific translation purpose. (Xiong Bing, 2014:86)

Source Text: 总而言之, 批分数该雪中送炭, 万万不能吝啬。

Target Text: In sum, when marking one should "send coal when it snows," that is, provide that which is most needed, and never be stingy.

This section describes how Liu Dongfang teaches Fang Hongjian to grade students' papers by following the principle of "send coal when it snows". The idiom forms a symmetrical "situation + action" structure in the preceding and following paragraphs, creating a well-balanced parallelism with clear echoes. The logical connection is tight—first presenting a dilemma, then providing assistance—which aligns with real-world reasoning. The idiom refers to giving people charcoal to keep them warm on a snowy day; it is a metaphor for giving people material or spiritual help in times of difficulty or crisis. The translator adds "that is, provide that which is most needed" to further explain the inner meaning of the idiom, which facilitates the reader's understanding. The translator anticipates cultural defaults and preconstructs explanatory frameworks to bridge potential comprehension gaps, reflecting the "translation policy" within preliminary norms.

5.1.2. Omission

Omission refers to the deletion of certain words, sentences or passages from the original text according to the lexical, syntactic, semantic, rhetorical or stylistic needs of the target language, or due to the constraints imposed by some specific cultural norms of the target language. (Xiong Bing, 2014:86) This technique make the structure more concise and fluent while maintaining the core meaning or achieving specific translation purposes.

Source Text: 方鸿渐为这事整天惶恐不安, 向苏小姐谢

了又谢，反给她说“婆婆妈妈”。

Target Text:only to have her call him“Granny”.

This passage describes how Fang Hongjian repeatedly thanked Miss Su for not only lending him her handkerchief but also washing the soiled one, only to be called “Granny” by her. The four-character idiom employs a symmetrical reduplicative structure, creating rhythmic repetition that enhances its cadence. Its tonal pattern produces a melodic alternation, making it phonetically pleasing. The term generally describes someone as fussy or overly fastidious. Both “pó” and “mā” carry connotations of nagging verbosity. In translation, the use of “granny” succinctly captures the essence of both “mother” and “mother-in-law”, effectively conveying the intended meaning while adhering to the preliminary norms of prioritizing cultural acceptability-achieving maximal cultural adaptation with minimal linguistic intervention.

5.2. Translation Techniques under the Initial Norm

Under the framework of the initial norm, the structural adjustment method and the conversion are the core techniques to achieve effective translation between the source language and the target language. In the following, we analyse the translation techniques of the four-character idioms in *Fortress Besieged*, systematically explain how the structural adjustment technique can optimize the logic of the translated text, and how the conversion method can enhance the fluency of the text through lexical conversion.

5.2.1. Structural Adjustment

Structural Adjustment is a fundamental translation technique for addressing linguistic structural differences. It involves reorganizing the source text according to the syntactic features and logical expression patterns of the target language, ensuring the translation conforms to the cognitive norms and aesthetic preferences of the target audience.

Source Text: 鸿渐本想骂阿刘，但看见他郑重其事地拿出这么一件法宝，忍不住大笑。

Target Text:but seeing how seriously Ah Liu had pulled out this magical object,.....

The four-character idiom features a concise symmetrical structure: “郑” emphasizes attitude, while “其事” specifies the target of focus. The two are closely related through the word “其”, constituting the correspondence of “attitude + object”. The idiom describes treating things very seriously. Instead of translating it directly as “with great ceremony” or “in a solemn manner”, the translation transforms it into “how seriously”, a modal particle, which describes Ah Liu’s behaviour (pulled out this magical object). Through the structural adjustment method, the translator retains the meaning of the original text, while making the translation more in line with English expression habits and enhancing readability. This shows that the translator has considered both the adequacy of the original text and the acceptability of the translation in the translation process, reflecting the comprehensive consideration of the initial norm.

5.2.2. Conversion

Conversion is a commonly used English-Chinese translation technique. When translating, due to the differences in grammar and customary expressions between the two languages, the translation must change the word class, (Shen Xuefu, 2012:33) to adapt to the expression habits of the target language, while ensuring that the meaning of the original

remains unchanged.

Source Text: 鸿渐道：“这就是生离死别比百年团聚好的地方，它能使人不老。”

Target Text: Hung-chien replied, “That’s why separation or death is preferred to ‘spending a lifetime together.’ It can keep people from aging.”

The idiom refers to partings that are either difficult to reunite after or permanent in nature. Within this four-character structure, “生离” and “死别” form a strictly parallel verb-object antithesis: “生” corresponds to “死”, both denoting states of existence; while “离” mirrors “别”, both indicating acts of separation. In terms of expressive effect, by juxtaposing the two most extreme forms of separation in human experience, the phrase intensifies the anguish to its utmost degree, far surpassing the emotional impact of standalone terms like “离别” or “永别”. The translation employs two nouns - “separation” and “death” - to convey the actions. This technique of conversion enhances the natural flow of the translated text, bridging conceptual differences between Chinese and Western linguistic patterns to achieve equivalent cultural information transfer. The conversion better aligns with the linguistic conventions and cultural norms of the target language, embodying the acceptability principle of initial norms in translation.

5.3. Translation Techniques under the Operational Norm

Under the framework of the operational norm, the cultural transformation techniques is the core skills for effective translation. In the following, we will analyse how the cultural transformation handles culturally loaded information, with reference to specific examples of translation of *Fortress Besieged*, so as to help us understand the key points of translation.

Fortress Besieged is replete with four-character idioms rich in allusions and metaphors. These culture-loaded terms often lead to cultural default in cross-cultural communication, posing significant cognitive challenges for readers from heterogeneous cultural contexts. To address this, the technique of cultural transformation is employed in translation. This technique adapts elements tied to specific historical, social, normative, or religious contexts in the source language to align with the target culture’s framework, ensuring both semantic fidelity and reader accessibility.

Source Text: “塞翁失马，焉知非福，使三年前结婚，则此番吾家破费不费矣。”

Target Text: ‘This may be a blessing in disguise.....’

In the novel, the idiom is used metaphorically to describe the death of Fang Hongjian’s fiancée, subtly suggesting that this personal tragedy might, in some way, turn out to be beneficial. The four-character idiom condenses the complete fable from *Huainanzi* into a highly compact narrative unit, omitting later plot developments while retaining the core paradox. In addition, it also reflects the dialectical view of ‘misfortune and good fortune’ in traditional Chinese culture. The idiom is a Chinese historical allusion, which has a historical and cultural gap for English readers. The translator transforms the allegorical metaphor of the original idiom into a more universal philosophical expression in the target language - “a blessing in disguise”. This technique allows readers to feel the cultural flavour of the original text while taking into account the comprehensibility and fluency of the translation. By cutting down the specific episodes of the

allusion and adopting fixed phrases in English, the translator embodies matricial norm and textual-linguistic norm.

6. Conclusion

This paper analyses the translation techniques of four-character idioms in the English translation of *Fortress Besieged* from the perspective of Toury's translation norms theory, from the viewpoints of preliminary norm, initial norm and operational norm respectively. It is found that the translators, under the guidance of Toury's translation norm theory, flexibly use the techniques of addition, omission and conversion to effectively convey the form, phonetics, expressive effect and cultural connotation of the four-character idioms.

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