

Study on the Translation of Culture-Loaded Expressions in *Shengsi pilao*

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Abstract

Despite a large number of studies on translation strategies of culture-loaded expressions of Mo Yan's novels, researchers have mostly investigated the translation of such expressions as a whole. The present study aims to explore the translation strategies applied by Howard Goldblatt in translating different categories of culture-loaded expressions of Mo Yan's novel *Shengsi pilao* (*Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*). It is necessary to identify the translation strategies of culture-loaded expressions employed by the translator, since they are large in number and are key to understanding the theme of the novel. In light of Peter Newmark's translation theory, the present study analyzes the translation of two categories of culture-loaded expressions and finds the translator applies different strategies in translating each category of them, namely semantic translation for sociopolitical terms and communicative translation for culture-specific terms.

Keywords: Translation strategies, Sociopolitical, Culture-specific, Semantic translation, Communicative translation

1. Introduction

Mo Yan is a Chinese writer renowned for his imaginative and humanistic fictions which became popular in the 1980s. After he was awarded the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature, it is hardly surprising that Mo and his works have attracted considerable attention around the world.

Shengsi pilao is a historical fiction exploring China's development during the second half of the 20th century through the eyes of a noble and generous landowner, who is killed and reincarnated as various farm animals in rural China. The story's protagonist Ximen Nao, is a benevolent and noble landowner, who is executed during the land reform movement in 1948

and after that his land is redistributed by the government. Upon his death, Nao finds himself in the underworld, where he was tortured by Lord Yama. Nao insists that he is innocent and then he is sent back to earth as a donkey in his village on January 1, 1950. In the subsequent reincarnations, he lives out the life of a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog, and a monkey, until finally being born again as a man. Through the lens of various animals, the protagonist experiences the political movements led by the Communist Party that swept China from 1950 to 2000.

There is only one published English version for this novel, which is *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* translated by Howard Goldblatt, the chief translator of Mo's novels from Chinese into English. Goldblatt's translation has given the English-speaking world access to Mo's works and thus made contributions to Mo's world-wide recognition.

The present study focuses on two categories of culture-loaded expressions, sociopolitical terms and culture-specific terms, because they are the most identifiable culture-loaded expressions in the novel. There might be other culture-loaded expressions that do not fit in these two categories. However, the present study will not attempt to include them, since they should be small in number.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Peter Newmark: *Semantic and Communicative Translation*

Semantic translation and communicative translation are two translation methods in Peter Newmark's flattened V diagram of translation methods, which Newmark considers as the only ones that fulfil the two main translation aims of accuracy and economy (Newmark, 1988, pp. 45-47).

Communicative translation attempts to produce on its reader an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original. Semantic translation attempts to render as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original.

(Newmark, 1981, p. 39)

Semantic translation puts emphasis on the source language and "differs from literal translation in that it 'respects context', interprets and even explains (metaphors, for instance)" (Munday, 2016, p. 72).

Communicative translation puts emphasis on the target language and "attempts to render the exact contextual meaning of the original in such a way that both content and language are readily acceptable and comprehensible to the readership" (Newmark, 1988, p. 47).

According to the table of Comparison of Newmark's semantic and communicative translation (Munday, 2016, p. 72), in terms of culture, semantic translation remains within the source language culture while communicative translation transfers foreign elements into the target language culture. In terms of the form of target language, semantic translation is more complex, awkward, detailed, concentrated, while communicative translation is smoother,

simpler, clearer, more direct, and more conventional.

2.2 Study on the Translation of Culture-Loaded Expressions in *Shengsi pilao*

Translation has been playing an important role in the spread of Mo Yan's works abroad, since his works are heavily imbued with Chinese rural culture. According to Mo Yan, of all his works, *Shengsi pilao* is most representative of his writing style. The only one published English translation of this work is done by Howard Goldblatt, a renowned literary translator of contemporary Chinese works. A number of studies have been done to identify Goldblatt's translation strategies of culture-loaded expressions.

Shao Lu (2013, pp. 62-67) suggests that Goldblatt tends to remove or reduce cultural elements in the translation of culture-loaded expressions in *Shengsi pilao* to facilitate comprehension of the English-speaking readers. Sun Huijun (2014, pp. 82-87) echoes this view in her analysis of Goldblatt's translation strategies of Mo Yan's novels, and suggests that Goldblatt adopts semantic translation supplemented by explanatory notes as another frequent option in translating culture-loaded terms. Zhao and Chen (2018, pp. 70-72) approaches the translation of culture-loaded terms in *Shengsi pilao* from the perspective of relevance theory and identifies five translation methods adopted by the translator, which are literal translation, free translation, explanation, transliteration, and omission.

While removal or reduction of cultural elements is a general strategy taken by Goldblatt, all the studies mentioned above examine Goldblatt's translation strategies of culture-loaded expressions of the novel as a whole. However, translation strategies for specific categories of culture-loaded expressions have not been investigated, which is the question the present study aims to explore.

3. Research Methodology

The present study addresses the research question through an analysis of the translation of randomly selected examples of two categories of culture-loaded terms. First, two categories of culture-loaded terms are distinguished, namely sociopolitical terms and culture-specific terms. Second, under each category, thirty examples randomly selected from different chapters of the novel are examined with an analysis of the translation methods taken by Howard Goldblatt in light of Newmark's translation theory. Finally, the present study attempts to identify through statistical analysis whether there are certain tendencies in Goldblatt's choice of translation methods for these two categories of culture-loaded expressions.

4. Findings and Discussion

As *Shengsi pilao* tells a Chinese rural story taking place during the second half of the 20th century, there exist a large number of sociopolitical terms related to particular political movements of China and culture-specific terms unique to the Chinese society. Analysis of the translation of the two categories of culture-loaded terms are as follows.

4.1 Sociopolitical Terms

Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary defines “sociopolitical” as “of, relating to, or involving a combination of social and political factors”. The sociopolitical terms selected for the present study are those that describe or are related to social and political events of a particular period of China.

Example 1:

ST:

主人牵著我，在街上走了一圈，从供销社走到屠宰组，屠宰组正在宰一头黑猪，白刀子进去，红刀子出来，很是刺激。

TT:

So my master started me walking, from the **Supply and Marketing Co-op** over to the butcher shop, where they were just then butchering a black pig. White knife in, red knife out, a terrifying sight.

“供销社” (literal translation: Supply Sale Cooperatives) is translated as “Supply and Marketing Co-op” in the example above. With an extensive presence in rural areas, the China’s supply and marketing cooperatives, as a product of the socialist planned economy, helped serving rural production and livelihood before the boom of the market economy. The translation “Supply and Marketing Co-op” is close to a literal translation, but it also pays attention to the context and the grammatical structures of the target language. It is therefore a semantic translation.

Example 2:

ST:

那些坏分子们，也都参加了人民公社，在社里边，受著贫下中农的管制，接受劳动改造。

TT:

The bad elements had all joined the **People’s Commune**, under the supervision of **the poor and lower-middle peasants**, reforming themselves through labor.

“人民公社” (literal translation: People Commune) refers to a type of large rural organization introduced in China in 1958, which became multi-functional organizations for the direction of local governments and the management of all economic and social activities. The organizations were gradually dismantled after 1979, and peasants were encouraged to cultivate private plots. The translation “People’s Commune” renders the literal, which is also the contextual meaning of the ST into the target language and pays attention to the target language grammar. It is therefore a semantic translation.

After the victory of the Communist Party in the civil war, land reform became an official policy throughout mainland China. Laws and policies on land reform were implemented after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China and the society was categorized into

several strata of social class, namely, landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants and laborers. Middle peasants were further divided into lower-, intermediate-, and upper-middle peasants. “贫下中农” (literal translation: poor low middle peasant) in the example above is translated as “the poor and lower-middle peasants”, which reproduces the contextual meaning of the ST and conforms to the grammatical structures of the target language. It is also a semantic translation.

Example 3:

ST:

要上学，必须上学，新社会，新国家，年轻一代，红色接班人，没有文化是万万不行的。

TT:

You need to go to school, that's something you have to do. Young people are the **future red leaders** in our new society, our new nation, and they mustn't be illiterate.

Red is Communism's emblematic color, and the iconic communist symbols, such as the red flag and red star, were introduced by China's ally Moscow in the former Soviet Union. There are terms such as “红色政权” and “红军” in Chinese, the literal translation of which are “Red Regime” and the “Red Army” respectively. “红色接班人” (literal translation: red successors) in the example above is translated as “future red leaders”, which renders the exact contextual meaning of the ST and conforms to the grammatically structures of the target language, is therefore a semantic translation.

Example 4:

ST:

揪出党内走资本主义的当权派，把“四清”运动进行到底！

TT:

“Ferret out Those in Power within the Party Who Are Taking the Capitalist Road,” “Pursue the **Four Clean-Ups Campaign** to its Conclusion!”

“‘四清’运动” (literal translation: Four Clean Movement) is translated as “Four Clean-Ups Campaign”. It is also known as the Socialist Education Movement, which was launched by Mao Zedong in 1963 seeking to remove reactionary elements within the bureaucracy of the Communist Party of China. Rendering the literal and contextual meaning of ST into the target language, “Four Clean-Ups Campaign” is a semantic translation.

4.2 Culture-Specific Terms

Culture-specific terms in the present study refer to objects, behaviors, practices etc. that are unique to the Chinese culture. Since there is a lack of equivalents for culture-specific terms in the target language, the translator has to adopt certain methods in translating such terms.

Example 5:

ST:

椅子旁边，是八仙桌，桌上摆著文房四宝，桌后的墙上，挂著一幅五子祝寿图。

TT:

Next to that chair was an **octagonal table** on which I kept my **writing brush, ink stick, ink slab, and paper**; hanging from the wall behind the table was **a longevity scroll**.

“八仙桌” (literal translation: eight immortal table) is translated as “octagonal table”. “八仙桌” is a big square table equipped with four stools that enables eight people to sit around. “八仙” refers to eight Taoist immortals that are well-known across the Chinese society. In translating this way, the translator might intend to only indicate the shape of the table without conveying the culture associated with it. However, the shape of table should be square instead of being octagonal. The translator may consider the term not so important to the understanding of the context, so he neglected to figure out the exact appearance of the table, and instead rendered it into a term that is readily acceptable and comprehensible to the target readers. Hence, it is a communicative translation.

“文房四宝” (literal translation: four treasures in the study), which refers to four common instruments of calligraphy in a traditional Chinese study. It is translated as “writing brush, ink stick, ink slab, and paper”, which is what would appear on a Chinese reader’s mind with this term. In translating this way, the translator is presumed to explain the term, trying to create an effect on the target reader as that on a ST reader, otherwise, the target readers would be puzzled about what the four treasures are. It is therefore a communicative translation.

“五子祝寿图” literally means a “five-children-wishing-longevity painting”, which depicts five children with peaches or treasures in their hands to present to an elderly, the God of Longevity. The painting is believed by Chinese to be auspicious for an elderly, so it is commonly seen on the wall of their home. It is translated as “a longevity scroll”, which communicates the intended function of the painting, but omits the translation of “五子” (five children). However, this will not hamper the understanding of the context for target readers but instead makes the TT simpler and smoother. Readily acceptable and comprehensible to the target readers, it is a communicative translation.

Example 6:

ST:

我看到马智伯脸色灰白，山羊鬍鬚哆哆嗦嗦，双手抱在胸前，对著怪物连连**作揖**，一边**作揖**，一边倒退，退到墙根，转身逃跑。

TT:

I watched Ma’s face turn ashen and his goatee begin to quiver. **With his hands cupped in front of his chest as a sign of respect**, he said a prayer and backed up.

“揖” is a gesture to show respect to someone in ancient China, which is a kind of meeting etiquette for Han people, and “作揖” means to make that body movement. “揖”, with no

equivalent in English, is translated as “with his hands cupped in front of his chest as a sign of respect”, which explains the body movement and its purpose. Unable to find an equivalent in the target language, the translator explains the term in the translation, which facilitates the understanding of the target readers. It is therefore a communicative translation.

Example 7:

ST:

我家的大院门口，原先正对着一堵镶嵌着斗大“福”字的影壁墙，土改复查时，被几个财迷心窍的民兵连夜拆毁……

TT:

The gate of my estate had once faced a screen wall on which the words “**Good Fortune**” had been inlaid, but that has been demolished by a pair of money-grubbing militiamen on a second inspection during Land Reform.

The Chinese character “福” hanging or inlaid on a wall is a common sign in China, especially during the Chinese New Year, which is supposed to bring good fortune to the family. In translating it into “good fortune”, the translator chooses to explain the contextual meaning of “福”, so that the content and the language of TT is readily acceptable to the target readers, which makes it a communicative translation.

Example 8:

ST:

那就是让金龙和互助结婚，让解放和合作结婚，俗话说就是‘**冲喜**’，准确地说是‘喜冲’，以喜冲邪。”

TT:

You must arrange marriages between Jinlong and Huzhu and Jiefang and Hezuo, what people call **a “health and happiness” wedding**, but more accurately a “health through happiness” wedding to drive away evil spirits.

“冲喜” (literal translation: “rush fortune”) is a traditional Chinese custom, which suggests marriage as means to get rid of bad fortune, so that the people involved will get better from illness. The translation “a ‘health and happiness’ wedding” supplemented by “a ‘health through happiness’ wedding” conveys the general message of the Chinese custom instead of rendering the semantic meaning, but the target readers can readily understand the custom through the translation. Therefore, it is a communicative translation.

4.3 Discussion

The sociopolitical terms and culture-specific terms under investigation in the present study and their translation are listed in Table 1 and Table 2 below.

Table 1. Translation of sociopolitical terms

Sociopolitical terms (ST) (ch.)	Sociopolitical terms (TT)	Translation method
供销合作社 4	Supply and Marketing Co-op	semantic
还乡团 4	the Landlords' Restitution Corps	communicative
单干户 8	independent farmers	communicative
红色接班人 8	future red leaders	semantic
人民公社 9	People's Commune	semantic
贫下中农 9	the poor and lower-middle peasants	semantic
大炼钢铁 9	the great melting campaign	semantic
集体食堂 9	communal kitchens	semantic
吃独食 10	hog it all	communicative
上访 13	appeal my case	communicative
反动的生产资料 14	a tool of reactionary production	semantic
生产大队 15	the production brigade	semantic
国营农场 15	the state-run farm	semantic
四清运动 16	the Four Clean-ups campaign	semantic
基层干部 16	grassroots cadres	semantic
红卫兵 17	the Red Guards	semantic
走资派 17	the capitalist-roaders	semantic
大跃进 17	the Great Leap Forward	semantic
三面红旗 17	the Three Red Banners	semantic
牛鬼蛇神 17	the ox-demons and the snake-spirits	semantic
大字报 17	a big-character poster	semantic
雇农 17	farm laborer	semantic
批斗会 19	criticism sessions	semantic
帝修反 21	imperialists, revisionists and reactionaries	semantic
工分 23	work points	semantic
联产到劳责任制 33	Contract Responsibility System	communicative
大包干责任制 33	subsistence system	communicative
坏分子 33	bad elements	semantic
路线斗争 33	struggles over the proper line	semantic
双规 52	double offenses	communicative

Of the 30 randomly selected examples of sociopolitical terms, 23 are rendered into English with semantic translation and the rest seven are translated in a communicative manner.

Table 2. Translation of culture-specific terms

Culture-specific terms (ST) (ch.)	Culture-specific terms (TT)	Translation method
牛头马面 1	Ox head and Horse Face	semantic
天津卫十八街的大麻花 1	fried fritters on Tianjin's Eighteenth Street	semantic
作揖 2	with his hands cupped in front of his chest as a sign of respect	communicative
太岁 2	the Wandering God	communicative
东厢房 3	eastern room	communicative
大宅院 3	estate	communicative
八仙桌 5	octagonal table	communicative
文房四宝 5	writing brush, ink stick, ink slab, and paper	communicative
五子祝寿图 5	a longevity scroll	communicative
影壁墙 5	a screen wall	communicative
“福”5	“Good Fortune”	communicative
四两二锅头 5	four ounces of good strong liquor	communicative
筐箩 10	the feed basket	communicative
老齐口 12	the teeth are all worn down	communicative
护身符 13	a guarantee	communicative
根不红苗不正 13	with no red roots	communicative
绿帽子 15	green hat	semantic
长工 16	hired hand	communicative
姨太太 18	concubine	communicative
革命样板戏 19	revolutionary model operas	semantic
窝窝头 20	corn cakes	communicative
跳大神 20	a dance of exorcism	communicative
孟婆忘魂汤 21	Granny Meng's amnesia elixir	communicative
望乡台 21	Homeward Terrace	semantic
阎王 21	Lord Yama	communicative
冲喜 28	a “health and happiness” wedding	communicative
嫦娥 28	the Lady in the Moon	communicative
三九天 33	winter	communicative
大老爷 33	Elder Yang	communicative
忆苦饭 44	Recalling Bitterness meals	semantic

Of the 30 randomly selected examples of culture-specific terms, 24 have been rendered in a communicative manner, while the rest six terms are treated with semantic translation.

The statistics show that there are certain tendencies in Howard Goldblatt's translation of culture-loaded expressions in Mo Yan's novel *Shengsi pilao*. It is found that the translator tends to apply semantic translation in rendering sociopolitical terms and communicative translation for culture-specific terms. It is believed that sociopolitical terms provide the information essential to understanding the background and ideology of a particular period of China, therefore, their translation should attain faithfulness and accuracy with priority given to the ST, which can be fulfilled by semantic translation. Culture-specific terms are key to understanding the uniqueness of the Chinese culture, but they have less to do with social or political backgrounds. Communicative translation of culture-specific terms pays more attention to the TT, which can facilitate the comprehension of the target readers. It should be noted that even within semantic or communicative translation, there are different forms of translation that makes the TT closer to or farther away from the source culture or the target culture.

5. Conclusion

The present study distinguishes two categories of culture-loaded expressions, namely, sociopolitical and culture-specific terms. In light of Peter Newmark's translation theory, semantic translation and communicative translation are the only translation methods that fulfil the main translation aim of accuracy and economy. Through textual and statistical analysis, the present study finds that Goldblatt tends to employ semantic translation in rendering socio-political terms and communicative translation for culture-specific terms. Semantic translation is suitable for sociopolitical terms, because it ensures the exact contextual meaning of the ST is rendered into target language. Communicative translation of culture-specific terms makes the TT smoother and easier, which facilitates the understanding of the novel by target readers. It should be noted that the forms of semantic translation or communicative translation vary. Even among terms that have been rendered with the same method, the translation of some terms could be closer to the ST or the TT than that of other terms. The present study treats the translation of the novel as the sole product of the translator without considering the influence of patronage on translation, whose role certainly cannot be ignored. Further study could explore the impact of agents made on the process and products of translation.

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