

Cultural Awareness in Dealing with the Color “Red”—With Reference to the Translation of *Hong Lou Meng*^{*}

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Abstract—Through gathering, analyzing and evaluating some cases of the Chinese 红’s translations from the translation of *Hong Lou Meng* by Hawkes, this paper aims to bring the issue of the significance of the cultural awareness to the forefront.

Index Terms—“red” in translation, cultural awareness, translation loss

I. INTRODUCTION

As pointed out by Bhabha’s (2004:326), “Translation is the performative nature of cultural communication”. “What is studied is the text embedded in its network of both source and target cultural signs ...”(Bassnett, 2001:123) Actually, their insightful observations lead us to a greater awareness of what could be covered by translation studies. It is well justified in the announcement made by Gentzler (2003:194): “Translation studies scholarship over the last three decades has built up a critical mass of scholarship, date that any cultural studies scholars investigating intercultural movement should consult”.

Based on this understanding, we attempt in this paper to “return to culture itself” in the light of translation. We shall establish a contrastive analysis of different versions of the color “red” in a Chinese classic work, *Hong Lou Meng* written by Cao Xue-qin, and its translated version the *Story of the Stone* by Hawkes. We are seeking the cultural effects underlying the translated texts, which results from the translator’s cultural background.

II. DIFFERENCE OF THE ATTITUDE TOWARD THE COLOR “RED”

People living in China and the West have totally different view on the color “red”. As the representative color of China, Chinese people like "red" best, which is used to be in a positive sense. They connected the color of red with anything happy, lucky and prosperous. In the English culture, however, though Red's positive connotations include: love (red roses and red hearts), festivity (Christmas, Santa' Claus), the red color is not always associated with something joyful. The positive use of "red" in English is very limited. Instead, it is often used in a negative sense. According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003), “red” has the following meaning:

adj. having the color or blood

n. the color of blood

Also, similar definitions are provided by some other authoritative dictionaries.

n. a color whose hue resembles that of blood or of the ruby or is that of the long-wave extreme of the visible spectrum (Merriam-Webster’s 11th Collegiate Dictionary, 2003)

adj. Something that is red is the colour of blood or fire.(Collins Cobuild Lexicon , 2001)

adj. having or being of the color red or any of its hues

n. a primary color, or any of a spread of colors at the lower end of the visible spectrum, varying in hue from that of blood to pale rose or pink (Webster’s New World Dictionary & Thesaurus, 1997)

Obviously, the connotations of the color “red” do not correspond across Chinese and English. In Chinese, the color “red” have a positive connotation while in English it has a clear indication of blood and connected with "sanguineness", "danger" and "violence" in the minds of native speakers of English.

Culturally, owing to the influence of Christianity, native speakers of English are not worshippers of the sun, which represents the color of red, as the Chinese, because God has been the only Lord for them to worship. “According to Bible, when Adam and Eve, the alleged ancestors of human beings, committed the original sin, God said to Eve:” I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.” The great pain that a woman suffers in giving birth to a child is bleeding freely, and that may be the reason why "red" has the meaning of danger and warning for English-speaking people.”

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The difference of the attitude towards the color “red” is illustrated by Hawkes (1973-1986) in the preface of the translated *Story of the Stone*:

One bit of imagery which *Stone*-enthusiasts will miss in my translation is the pervading redness of the Chinese novel. One of its Chinese titles is *Red*, to begin with, and red as a symbol--sometimes of spring, sometimes of youth, sometimes of good fortune or prosperity--recurs again and again throughout it. Unfortunately--apart from the rosy cheeks and vermeil lip of youth--redness has no such connotations in English and I have found that the Chinese reds have tended to turn into English golds or greens (‘spring the green spring’ and ‘golden girls and boys’ and so forth). I am aware that there is some sort of loss here, but have lacked the ingenuity to avert it.

III. TRANSLATION LOSS

As Fairclough points out: “Language is a socially and historically situated mode of action in a dialectical relationship with other facets of the social”(1995:54), “the wider social and cultural contextual matrix must be attended to because it shape discourse practices in important ways and is itself cumulatively shaped by them” (1995:50). Hervey and Higgins explain that:

This is due to the fact that the backgrounds, shared knowledge, cultural assumptions and learnt responses of monolingual TT speakers are inevitably culture-bound. Given this fact, SL speakers’ responses to the SL are never likely to be replicated exactly by effects on members of a different culture. Even a small cultural distance between the ST audience and the TT audience is bound to produce a fundamental dissimilarity between the effects of the ST and those of the TT--such effects can at best be similar in a global and limited sense; they can never be ‘the same’. (1992:23)

Hence, translation loss is an unavoidable fact which many people find that they have to deal with when seeking strategies for their translation practices. As Hervey and Higgins points out:

The transfer of meaning from ST to TT necessarily involves a certain degree of translation loss; that is, a TT will always lack certain culturally relevant features that are present in the ST. An important corollary of this concept of translation loss is that it embraces any failure to replicate a ST exactly, whether this involves losing features in the TT or adding them. Translation loss is inevitable, even when the ST gains in, say, economy, vividness, or avoidance of ambiguity. (1992:24-25)

IV. RED IN TRANSLATION

When Hawkes encounter the Chinese “红”, or “red” in translating *Hong Lou Meng*, he employs communication strategies to compensate for TT readers’ lack of cultural knowledge about the Chinese “红” and to expand their resources to arrive at a communicative goal. The strategies include abandonment and avoidance of the use of “red” and paraphrase or use of a synonym. He makes every effort to bridge the cultural gap by restructuring the message the Chinese “红” conveys.

Let us try to analyze the translation of the Chinese “红”, or “red” in the following utterances excerpted from *Hong Lou Meng*.

A. Use of a Synonym

Example 1

薛姨妈道:“我的儿,你们女孩儿家那里知道?自古道:‘千里姻缘一线牵’。管姻缘的有一位月下老儿,预先注定,暗里只用一根红丝,把这两个人的脚绊住。凭你两家那怕隔着海呢,若有姻缘的,终久有机会作成了夫妇。这一件事,都是出人意料之外。(第五十七回)

Hawkes: ‘My child,’ said Aunt Xue, ‘you are too young to understand these things. Old folk talk about “the unseen thread that binds”’. They say that marriages are decided by an Old Man Under the Moon who joins future couples together by tying them round the ankles with a scarlet thread, and once he’s done that, it doesn’t matter how far apart they are, even if there are oceans between them, sooner or later something will happen to bring them together and they will end up husband and wife. These things are quite unpredictable.

Here, Hawkes uses “a scarlet thread” to translate “红丝” instead of “a red thread” since in English “red” has a clear indication of blood while its synonym “scarlet” represents something bright red, which approximates what the Chinese “红”.

Example 2

说着,便伸手掣出一双男子的绵袜并一双缎鞋,又有一个小包袱。打开看时,里面是一个同心如意,并一个字帖儿。一总递给凤姐。凤姐因理家久了,每每看帖看帐,也颇识得几个字了。那帖是大红双喜笺,便看上面写道:(第七十四回)

Hawkes: She stretched her own hand out as she said this and, diving into the trunk, fetched out, successively, a pair of men’s padded socks, a pair of men’s satin slippers, and a packet containing a little loving Couple ornament and a letter. All these things she handed over to Xi-feng. From handling so many bills, invoices and accounts during her years as a household manager, Xi-feng had learned to recognize quite a large number of characters and was able to make out the whole of the crude missive, written on pink Double Happiness notepaper, that Zhou Rui’s wife had just thrust into

her hand.

Similarly, here Hawkes change the Chinese “红” into “pink” since pink refers to a pale red color not the bleeding color, which corresponds with the actual color of the Chinese Double Happiness notepaper.

Example 3

岂道红绡帐里，公子情深；始信黄土陇中，女儿命薄！（第七十八回）

Hawkes: At such times must the young man in his crimson-curtained bed seem most cruelly afflicted; at such times must the maiden beneath the yellow earth seem most cruelly ill-fated.

Here, to avoid the connotation of blood, Hawkes translate “红绡帐” into “crimson-curtained bed” with “crimson” replacing “red”, because it is “crimson” that has the meaning of “something deep red in color”

B. Use of Other Color

Example 4

那宝玉一心裁夺盘算，痴痴的回至怡红院中，正值黛玉和袭人坐着说话儿呢。（第三十六回）

Hawkes: It was a reflective, self-critical Bao-yu who made his way back to Green Delights, so bemused that he scarcely noticed where he was going. When he arrived, Dai-yu and Aroma were sitting in conversation together.

And,

李纨道：“怡红公子是压尾，你服不服？”（第三十七回）

Hawkes: “At all events,” said Li Wan, ‘Green Boy’s is bottom. Do you accept that judgment, Green Boy?’

In the above sentences, the word “红” in “怡红院” and “怡红公子” are both changed into “green”, since in English the connotation of “green” has the similar images as the Chinese “红” as referring to “spring” in “怡红院” and “youth” in “怡红公子”.

Example 5

奈何天，

伤怀日，寂寥时，

试遣愚衷。

因此上，

演出这悲金悼玉的《红楼梦》。（第五回）

Hawkes:

Now woes begone

And quite cast down

In low estate

I would my foolish heart expose

And so perform

This Dream of Golden Days, And all my grief for my lost loves disclose.

In this poem, Hawkes turns “红” into “Golden” because in English, “golden girls” has the similar connotation as in Chinese referring to beautiful girls in their youth.

C. Use of Paraphrases

Example 6

警幻道：“此茶出在放春山遣香洞，又以仙花灵叶上所带的宿露烹了，名曰‘千红一窟’。”（第五回）

Hawkes: ‘The leaves are picked in the Paradise of the Full-blown Flower on the Mountain of Spring Awakening,’ Disenchantment informed him. ‘It is infused in water collected from the dew that lies on fairy flowers and leaves. The name is “Maiden’s Tears”’.

Here, “红” implies all the ladies of this book, which has nothing to do with blood, and “窟” is a word play of crying. So Hawkes explicitly translated “千红一窟” into “Maiden’s Tears”.

Example 7

可叹这，青灯古殿人将老，辜负了，红粉朱楼春色阑。（第五回）

Hawkes: Sad it seemed that your life should in dim-lit shrines be wasted, All the sweets of spring untasted.

Here, since “红粉朱楼” refers to the prosperity of spring, the phrase containing “红” is paraphrased into “all the sweets of spring”

Example 8

王夫人因向王善保家的道：“你们进去，好生防他几日，不许他在宝玉屋里睡觉，等我回过老太太，再处治他。”喝声：“出去！站在这里，我看不上这浪样儿！谁许你这么花红柳绿的装扮！”（第七十四回）

Hawkes: She turned to the Wang Shan-bao’s wife. ‘When you and the others go into the Garden, I want you to take particular care that this girl is kept well away from Bao-yu. Make sure that she doesn’t sleep in the same room. I shall be dealing with her in a few days’ time, when I had a chance of speaking about her to Her Old Ladyship.’ As she turned again momentarily towards Skybright, her voice rose almost into a shout. ‘Get out of here! The sight of you standing there like a young trollop offends my eyes! Who gave you permission anyway to dress yourself up in that garish

fashion?’

Here, the color “红” is used to suggest the color of the clothes and is interpreted as “dress yourself up in that garish fashion?”

D. Use of Omission

Example 9

眼前不见尘沙起，将军俏影红灯里。(第七十八回)

Hawkes: As he watched them drill, he scarcely saw the clouds of dust arise; 'Twas the lovely Colonel's lamplit face that swam before his eyes.

And

众人不解，袭人等忙拾起来。众人看时，上面一枝杏花，那红字写着“瑶池仙品”四字。(第六十三回)

Hawkes: The others were puzzled, until Aroma picked the card up and held it out for them to see. The picture was of a spray of almond blossom with the caption 'Spirit of the Afterglow'

And

贾蓉接过禀帖和账目，忙展开捧着，贾珍倒背着两手，向贾蓉手内看去。那红禀上写着：……(第五十三回)

Hawkes: Jia Rong took the greetings-card and schedule from the servant, and opening up the card, held it out for his father to read. Cousin Zhen folded his hand behind his back and bent over to read the inscription: ...

Here, the word “红” are all omitted in the three sentences, the omissions take place because the information the Chinese “红” convey is nothing but the color without any implied connotation, which is considered unimportant for the target English readers by Hawkes.

V. CONCLUSION

From the above examples, we will see that, due to the cultural differences, the Chinese color word “红” or “red” tends towards great derogatory connotation, namely, the ugly image of blood connected with "sanguineness", "danger" and "violence" in the minds of native speakers of English. People have to make judgments in translating this word for its relevant context using various strategies, sometimes at the expenses of somewhat translation loss, otherwise, misunderstandings and mistakes will occur. In all, cultural awareness is of crucial importance while dealing with translation.

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