

A Comparative Study on English Translations of Culture-loaded Words in *The Art of War*

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Abstract—As the earliest and the most revered military treatise in ancient China, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* contains a great number of culture-loaded words. This paper analyzes the problems and solutions in translating culture-loaded words by comparing two influential English versions of *The Art of War* by the leading sinologist Dr. Lionel Giles and the contemporary Chinese translator Lin Wusun. The comparative study shows that the two translators with different culture backgrounds rendered the culture-loaded words in *The Art of War* in different ways. It is indicated that the study of culture-loaded words and expressions is of vital importance to cross-cultural communication.

Index Terms—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, culture-loaded words, translation

I. INTRODUCTION

The *Art of War*, written by Sun Tzu more than 2000 years ago, is the earliest and the most revered military treatise in China. As a systematic guide to strategies and tactics for ancient Chinese rulers and commanders, the book discusses various maneuvers and the effect of terrain on the outcome of battles, and emphasizes the importance of gathering accurate information about the enemy's forces, deployments, and movements. It consists of thirteen chapters, but each chapter has its particular emphasis which is closely related and systematically treated, forming an orderly arranged integrated system of war direction. With its concentrated essence of wisdoms on warfare, *The Art of War* has been translated into various languages since the 17th century, exerting a great impact on military, political and business circles all over the world.

The first English translation of the text was by Captain E. F. Calthrop, based on an earlier Japanese translation. Since the appearance of the first indirect translation in 1905, English versions of *The Art of War* have been brought forth one after another. Each of the English versions has helped to promote the study of *The Art of War* in the English-speaking world. For a better understanding of cross-cultural translation, this paper intends to analyze the problems and solutions in translating culture-loaded words and expressions by comparing two influential English versions of *The Art of War*. One is Dr. Lionel Giles's translation, and the other one is Lin Wusun's translation. Dr. Lionel Giles, a leading sinologist and an assistant curator at the British Museum, published his own version *Sun Tzu on the Art of War: the Oldest Military Treatise in the World* in London in 1910. His English version included the Chinese text of Sun Tzu, the English translation, and voluminous notes. Dr. Lionel Giles' translation established the groundwork for later translators who published their own editions. Lin Wusun, a celebrated contemporary Chinese translator, published a new English version *Sun Zi: The Art of War & Sun Bin: The Art of War* in Beijing in 1999. With his profound knowledge of Chinese culture, Lin was very concerned about the transfer of authentic Chinese culture in *The Art of War* to Western readers. His translation was collected in *The Library of Chinese Classics*.

II. CULTURE-LOADED WORDS

As an act of cross-cultural communication, translations always reflect the cultural and historical conditions under which they have been produced. Towards the end of the 1980s, translation studies began to take issues of context, culture and history into consideration, and the emphasis in the reflection on translation had shifted to matters of culture. In *Translation, History and Culture*, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere (1990) assert that, "There is always a context in which the translation takes place, always a history from which a text emerges and into which a text is transposed. [...] Translation as an activity is always doubly contextualized, since the text has a place in two cultures." (p. 11).

Cross-cultural translation aims at the better understanding of foreign cultures and developing the source culture through translation. The influence of one culture can enrich another and at the same time make itself better accepted and more widely transmitted. As the carrier of culture, language is influenced and shaped by culture. Culture-loaded words are laden with specific national cultural information, for they are the direct or indirect reflection of national culture at the structure of lexeme. Every language has its own culture-loaded terms, which are the symbolic representation of the value system, history, religion, customs, thinking patterns and life styles of that peculiar culture. Therefore, the study of culture-specific words and expressions is of vital importance to cross-cultural communication.

Generally speaking, culture-loaded words have two meanings. One is their conceptual meaning and the other is connotative meaning. Conceptual meaning is often described as dictionary meaning or literal meaning of a word which is relatively constant and stable, because it is the meaning agreed upon by all the members of the same speech community. Connotative meaning is that part of meaning which has been supplemented to the conceptual meaning. It is the meaning that arises out of the associations the word acquires and thus is open-ended, unstable and indeterminate because of its variation with culture, time, place, class, individual experiences, etc. In this way, cultural-loaded words can be classified into two groups:

(A) Culture-loaded words with a conceptual meaning that do not exist in the target language. For some Chinese culture-loaded words, conceptual equivalents in English are absent simply because there are no equivalent objects, events or ideas in the English culture.

(B) Culture-loaded words with a certain connotative meaning that fall short of or differs from the nearest corresponding words in the target language. Some culture-loaded words, apart from their conceptual meanings, are loaded with specific connotative meanings.

III. ON TRANSLATING CULTURE-LOADED WORDS IN THE ART OF WAR INTO ENGLISH

As one of representative works in Chinese classics, *The Art of War* was evolved in the context of ancient Chinese culture, containing a great number of culture-loaded words. The meanings of these cultural-bound words and expressions are vital to make target text readers better understand authentic Chinese culture, for they represent the unique features of ancient Chinese military culture. Eugene Nida (1993) notes, "what a translator needs is a method for sorting out the possible semantic difference, and then selecting that meaningful relation which is most in keeping with the context." (p. 64). Under the circumstance, it is essential for a translator to identify the possible meaning of the culture-loaded words in the source text and select the corresponding words in the target language.

However, a receptor language may not have conceptual or connotative equivalents in the target language, and vice versa. Furthermore, many cultural-bound words and expressions in *The Art of War* have undergone through diachronic changes during the long history. Due to the problems posed by culture-loaded words, translators are likely to ignore the culture specific message which would require too much effort in understanding the original text, and thus will decrease its literature importance as a Chinese classic. As Eugene Nida writes, "in fact, difficulties arising out of differences of culture constitute the most serious problems for translators and have produced the most far-reaching misunderstandings among readers" (ibid.: 101). Hence, culture-loaded words pose particular problems for translators of *The Art of War*.

A. *Culture-loaded Words without Conceptual Equivalents*

Example 1: 夫未战而庙算胜者，得算多也；未战而庙算不胜者，得算少也。

Giles' translation: Now the general who wins a battle makes many calculations in his temple where the battle is fought. The general who loses a battle makes but few calculations beforehand.

Lin's translation: He who makes full assessment of the situation at the prewar council meeting in the temple (translator's note: an ancient Chinese practice) is more likely to win. He who makes insufficient assessment of the situation at this meeting is less likely to win.

The translation of Chinese classics involves two processes: the intra-lingual translation and inter-lingual translation. With the development of society and language, the meanings of some culture-loaded words in Chinese classics have experienced great change. The diachronic change of language poses difficulties for the translation of Chinese classics, for the sound, meaning and syntax of the classics are quite different from modern Chinese, among which culture-loaded words are the most sensible ones to these changes and thus cause many obstacles in understanding and translating Chinese classics.

In the above example, "庙算" are typical culture-loaded words in ancient Chinese. As an ancient Chinese practice, it referred to prewar meetings in ancestral temple held by generals and kings to make full assessment of mutual strength and make battle plans. Nowadays, it is no longer done before a war. Lin's explanatory translation and note kept the historical conceptual meaning, but Giles' literal translation lost its historical meaning.

Example 2: 故胜兵若以镒称铢，败兵若以铢称镒。

Giles' translation: A victorious army opposed to a routed one, is as a pound's weight placed in the scale against a single grain.

Lin's translation: Thus, a victorious army has full advantage over its enemy, just like pitting 500 grains against one grain; the opposite is true with an army doomed to defeat, like pitting one against 500.

Sun Tzu used two ancient Chinese measure words "镒" and "铢" to compare the military strength between opposite armies. However, most of English readers know nothing about ancient Chinese weight units, so a literal rendition of them may cause confusion among the target language community. Catford (1965) states, "The SL (Source Language) and TL (Target Language) items rarely have the same 'meaning' in the linguistic sense; but they can function in the same situation." (p. 49). Therefore, it is suggested that the TL should be chosen to replace the SL on the basis of functional equivalence rather than merely formal equivalence. In the above example, Giles replaced yi and zhu with "pound" and "grain" which are English weight units, while Lin substituted them with "500 grains" and "one grain". In this way, both translations offer target readers a better understanding of the contextual meaning of the original.

B. Culture-loaded Words without Connotative Equivalents

Example 3: 胜者之战民也，若决积水于千仞之溪者，形也。

Giles' translation: The onrush of a conquering force is like the bursting of pent-up waters into a chasm a thousand fathoms deep.

Lin's translation: So great is the disparity of strength that a victorious army goes into battle with the force of an onrushing torrent which, when suddenly released, plunges into a chasm a thousand fathoms deep. This is what we mean by disposition.

Besides the conceptual meaning, culture-loaded words may have profound cultural connotation, which are apt to vary from age to age and from society to society. In classical Chinese, “千仞” may be associated with the image of an extreme height without limit in Chinese culture, while in English the expression “a thousand fathoms” is only a scientific measure. Nevertheless, both Giles and Lin translated it literally in the above example. The associative meaning is completely lost in the target language, and the translation can not produce the same figurative impact to target text reader.

Example 4: 故举秋毫不为多力，

Giles' translation: To lift an autumn hair is no sign of strength...

Lin's translation: It is like lifting a strand of animal hair in autumn (tr.: Animal hair is very fine and light in autumn.), which is no sign of strength.

In their English translations of the cultural term “秋毫”, Giles and Lin preferred to use “an autumn hair” which literally means one of small hair that birds or other animals newly grow in autumn. As English people usually express the same idea by the idiom “as light as a feather”, the target readers might fail to grasp the connotative meaning in the Chinese culture because they are less likely to associate the image with the implied figurative meaning that an animal's hair is often compared to something light and fine. In this way, the transference of culture is reduced in the translation. Nevertheless, Lin gave an explanation “Animal hair is very fine and light in autumn” to make sure that the target text readers can understand this culture-loaded term and its connotation.

C. Culture-loaded Words with Historical Allusions

Example 5: 昔殷之兴也，伊挚在夏；周之兴也，吕牙在殷。

Giles' translation: Of old, the rise of the Yin dynasty was due to I Chih who had served under the Hsia. Likewise, the rise of the Chou dynasty was due to Lu Ya who had served under the Yin.

Lin's translation: In ancient times, Yi Zhi, who had served the Xia Dynasty, was instrumental in the rise of the Yin Dynasty over Xia. Likewise, Lu Ya, who had served the Yin Dynasty, had much to do with the rise of the succeeding Zhou Dynasty.

Allusion derives from the stories, legend, tales, literature works and religions, etc. Owing to different history and cultural traditions between English and Chinese, allusion inevitably carries a lot of cultural connotations, which may cause cultural gap and even evoke misunderstandings. In the above example, “伊挚” (Yi-Zhi) and “吕牙” (Lu-Ya) were well-known historical figures in China, who played important role in the rise of the Shang Dynasty and the Zhou Dynasty respectively. Giles translated them literally and rendered the allusion at the surface meaning. The target readers may misunderstand that the two Chinese figures once acted as spies in the country where they lived because the theme of the chapter is the importance of spy.

Example 6: 投之无所往，诸、刳之勇也。

Giles' translation: But let them once be brought to bay, and they will display the courage of a Zhu and a Kui (Zhuan Zhu and Cao Kui were well known warriors in ancient China).

Lin's translation: Yet when they are thrown into a situation where there is no way out, they will be as courageous as Zhuan Zhu, Cao Kui and other heroes of ancient times.

“Zhuan Zhu” and “Cao Kui” were brave warriors who volunteered to kill the king. Sun Tzu quoted the allusions to expound that soldiers should be as courageous as the two warriors so that they dared to go for any extremely dangerous task. In order to make target text readers understand why Sun Tzu quoted the allusions with historical names, both Giles and Lin pointed out that they are “well known warriors in ancient China” and “heroes of ancient times”.

IV. CONCLUSION

As the most famous military masterpiece in ancient China, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* was characterized by the brevity of diction and the depth of meaning. Translating this ancient Chinese military masterpiece into English is far from being an easy task because of the difficulties in fully comprehending the original text, and in accurately transferring the original meaning and producing a readable translation. This paper analyzes the problems and solutions in translating culture-loaded words and expressions by comparing two influential English versions of *The Art of War* by the leading sinologist Dr. Lionel Giles and the contemporary Chinese translator Lin Wusun. The comparative study shows that the two translators with completely different cultural backgrounds rendered the culture-loaded words in *The Art of War* in different ways.

As a celebrated Chinese translator, Lin tried his best to preserve the original meanings of culture-loaded words without conceptual equivalents in the target culture. However, Giles tended to substitute this kind of culture-loaded words with the existing concepts in English culture, which led to the loss of meaning or even caused the distortion of meaning. In translating the culture-loaded words without connotative equivalents, Lin preferred to translate them literally with notes to keep the cultural connotation and make target text readers understand them; in contrast, Giles translated them literally but he did not add notes. As a result, his translations could be difficult for target text readers to appreciate the rhetoric function of culture-loaded words in the target culture.

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