

Cultural Translation of Chinese Diasporic Translators: A Semiotic Perspective

By

Liu Yang

PhD candidate, Semiotics and Cultural Studies School of Liberal Arts, Shinawatra University

Email: 24398992@qq.com

Saengchan Hemchua

School of Liberal Arts, Shinawatra University Email: saengchan.h@siu.ac.th

Abstract

Under the background of “Chinese culture going out”, the Chinese diasporic translators, as a special community, have never stopped writing, translating and interpreting Chinese stories away from their home country for their homesickness. Their cultural diasporic experience across “self” and “the other” can help them coordinate the cultural transition between cultural heterogeneity and accessibility. Undoubtedly, in the context of globalization and localization, they can serve as positive “cultural coordinators” in cross-cultural communication. In this paper, from the perspective of Semiotics, the author focuses on cultural identity of Chinese diasporic translators and explores the cultural translation in their literary works.

Key words: cultural identity; cultural translation; Chinese diasporic translators; Semiotics

Introduction

In the context of the “The Belt and Road” and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, with the increase of China’s comprehensive national strength and its international influence, “Chinese culture going out” has not only become a national development strategy, but also an inevitable requirement of the times. It’s particularly important for us to make a better China story in English and make China voice better heard throughout the world.

Since the 21st century, the influence of Chinese literature has been increasing day by day, and it is a great addition to world literature. Translation has always played an important role in national cultural exchanges, because the inheritance of ideology and culture, the implementation of cultural strategies and the interaction of cultures cannot be separated from translation. In the context of the cultural globalization, the translator bears the responsibility of spreading Chinese culture in order to improve the country’s cultural soft power. Therefore, in the process of Chinese culture going out, the translator plays a particularly important role.

In this paper, from the perspective of Semiotics, the author focuses on cultural identity of Chinese diasporic translators and explores the cultural translation in their literary works. Moreover, “translation” here is defined in its broad sense, including all forms of human communication happening everywhere from the semiotic view. Therefore, all forms of transformations of cultural signs should be taken into consideration in this paper.

Diaspora

In fact, the word “diaspora” has gone through a historical process of origination, development and evolvement. It derives from an ancient Greek word “diaspeirein”, which means the growth, reproduction and proliferation of plants by sowing or scattering the seeds or pollen. It is first used to denote colonial activities and population migration by the ancient Greeks. Diaspora is a common and special cultural phenomenon of human society with a long history, as Cohen pointed out that “for over 2500 years, one notion of the word ‘diaspora’ has been dominant”. Especially in the 19th century, there is an increasingly number of ethnic groups of diaspora in the world, which have aroused the attention of the academic community.

The diaspora studies appeared in the 1970’s. The term “diaspora” originally referred to the dispersion of Jews outside of Israel in the sixth century B.C., when they were exiled to Babylonia. Later, it refers to the historical phenomena of any people or ethnic population who are forced or induced to emigrate from ancestral homeland vagabond zing all around the world as well as the relative issues concerning adaptation, conflicts and integration in the social, economic and cultural exchange between diaspora community and residential dominant society. Nowadays, the term is used to refer to the people who were forced to leave their homeland or chose to leave their homeland voluntarily. While the diaspora preserves its original meanings such as migration, status of immigrants and homeless feeling, it acquires some new implications such as trans-ethnic culture, culture interpretation, culture traveling, and culture intermixture.

In the era of the globalization, the capital circulation results in not only the production globalization, but also an extensive exchange of ethnic groups and cultures. Because of its commonality and globalization, the diaspora has become a cultural phenomenon. Due to the development and reconstructing of the concept of diaspora, the study in this field has become a hot topic in the research of social science in recent years. To some extent, the process of exploring diaspora identity is the historically and culturally “root-seeking”, the reflection on the migration, conflicts, co-existence, and integration among races, the major aspects of cross-ethnic, cross-cultural study.

Chinese Diasporic Translators

In the history of China, there have been many waves of intellectuals going abroad to study. During this period, many people chose to move to Europe and the United States for various reasons, but they never stopped paying attention to their motherland. They walked through different cultures and made breakthroughs with the cross-cultural communication ability out of the solidified local cultural thinking mode. Together with many local Chinese cultural practitioners, they write, translate and interpret Chinese stories in a variety of ways. A large number of writers who have left their hometown and settled down other countries in the world express a kind of displaced emotion and experience by means of literature creation, which has also promoted the vigorous development of diasporic literature in the middle and late 20th century (Wang, 2011).

Actually, many scholars try to define “Chinese diasporic translator” from different perspectives, such as Wang (2011), Wang (2017) and Wang (2017). It is a pity that so far scholars have not reached a consensus. Wang Shirong defines the Chinese diasporic translators as a group of people who leave mainland China to live in other parts of the world and work in

the field of cultural translation (Wang, 2017). Huang and Xie (2018) once revealed that the research of diasporic translators should contain four key words: “hometown migration”, “original memory”, “sense of identity” and “cultural translation”. In fact, not every translator who resettles abroad can be considered as a diasporic translator. For example, some translators who resettled abroad have assimilated into the culture of the host country and lack of homesickness. They usually translate in a way that caters to the cultural elements of the host country. This kind of translators cannot be regarded as diasporic translators. To be a Chinese diasporic translator, there are two basic requirements: one is to immigrate to a foreign country, the other is to have a strong affection for his homeland.

Cultural Identity of Chinese Diasporic Translators

“Identity” means a series of features, such as race, nationality, place of birth, place of residence, language, religious belief, figure, gender, age and so on, that determine who you are and how you are recognized. As a social animal, man cannot live without identity. In other words, identity is so important to a person that if he loses it, he will lose the sense of belonging and will be alienated from the society. Seeking and defining one’s own identity is the expression of one’s subjectivity. However, identity of a person is not fixed, but dynamic, which may change with the geographical and social environment he lives, or even with his social role and status.

For those who leave their homes to study or make a living in a foreign country, they not only suffer from physical displacement, but also psychological uncertainty and depression. They vacillate between dual identities and suffer physical and mental torture. With the spreading of the diaspora literature, cultural identity has become a hot topic in this field. In order to have a better understanding of cultural identity of diasporic translators, it is essential to discuss what cultural identity refers to.

Cultural identity is an important issue in the study of diaspora literature. Said puts forwards that “culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and thought. It differentiates “‘us’ from ‘them’”. In this sense, culture is a source of identity” (Said, 1994). Although there are many definitions of the term “culture”, its basic meaning refers to the mental state, the specific behavioral and thinking modes of a nation formed due to long-term historical changes. It is regional and impossible to eradicate completely. Cultural identity is generally regarded as a set of characteristics inherent in a particular culture and nation, which is formed in the discourse of history and culture, and is about positioning rather than essence. In other words, cultural identity is changeable and dynamic with the change of living conditions.

As a Jamaican-born British cultural theorist, Hall has showed his deep perception of diaspora’s cultural identities. In 1993, Hall enunciated his interpretation about the cultural identity of diaspora in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. He proposed that cultural identity is a matter of “being” as well as of “becoming”. In 1996, Hall expounded in the essay “Who Needs ‘Identity?’” as follows: “Identification is constructed on the back of some common origin or shared characteristic with another person and group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation” (Grossberg, Hall, & Du Gay, 1996). Hall understands identity construction as a dynamic process. He argues that identity is never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. In the 1990s, Hall gave his opinion about the

diaspora and cultural identity in a theoretical way. According to Hall, a diaspora's cultural identity is not in a static state. Instead, it is always in a dynamic state, from the central subject to the de-centering subject, and from the accomplished matter to the uncomplicated matter, leading to the transformation of diaspora's cultural identities in the postcolonial context. Therefore, what features diaspora's cultural identity is its fluidity?

As a special group of translators, diasporic translators play a crucial role in the translation of Chinese culture. Their broad horizons and multi-layered cultural diasporic experience across "self" and "other" can help them coordinate the cultural transition between cultural heterogeneity and accessibility. It is no doubt that in such context of globalization and localization, they can serve as positive "cultural coordinators" in cross-cultural communication. In a narrow sense, diasporic literature translation is culture-orientation in translation, and in a broad sense, it is the writing of Diasporas in heterogeneous cultures.

With the development of globalization, the phenomenon of migration is becoming more and more common. It is undeniable that most of immigrants have experienced or are experiencing an identity crisis due to changes in their living environment and socio-cultural environment. As immigrants, they may first struggle to meet their basic survival needs, and then seek to join and gain acceptance in mainstream society. In terms of nationality, they can legally naturalize and become citizens of the host country, but this does not mean that they have made themselves thoroughly local from a cultural point of view, because cultural identity is not as simple as nationality. Their multi-regional experience and dual nationality make them have dual cultural identity or multi-cultural identity.

Cultural Translation of Chinese Diasporic Translators

China's stories are told in English by Chinese diasporic translators. This kind of "local globalization writing" adds some concepts inherent in Chinese culture into English, which greatly promotes the globalization process of Chinese culture. The writing theme of Chinese diasporic translators is deeply rooted in China, and Chinese cultural elements are their eternal source of inspiration. Because of their double national and cultural identities, Chinese diasporic translators usually float between the global and the local, and can not only have a dialogue with the local culture, but also promote the local culture to be more global.

Cultural Translation

According to Bassnett (1980), "translation studies is not merely a minor branch of comparative literary study, not yet a specific area of linguistics, but a vastly complex field with many far-reaching ramifications". The behavior of translation involves linguistic conversion as well as social and psychological activities. It can be seen as a process of negotiation between texts and between cultures. In this process, all kinds of linguistic, cultural and even psychological transformations are accomplished through translators.

Bhabha (1994) expounded the concept of "cultural translation" quite clearly in *How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation*, the last essay of his work *The Location of Culture*. He points out that postcolonial migration is not only a "transitional" reality, but also a "translational" phenomenon. In his eyes, the liminality of migrant experience is no less a transitional phenomenon than a translational one and that cultural translation is not limited to linguistic and semantic transference but involves the configuration of the disjunctive rewriting of

transcultural, migrant experience in the postcolonial context. He insists that the state of being transferred from a country (thus a culture) to another should be interpreted as “cultural translation”. “Cultural translation” not only refers to cross-cultural text transformation between two languages, it also involves the state of translators in their cross-cultural travel and migration process. In other words, postcolonial writing is a special form of translation, to specifically, culture translation. The 21st century witnesses the massive movement of immigration. The travel across geographical space as well as minds. In a broad sense, cultural translation has transcended the conversion between two languages under two different social backgrounds. Bhabha’s colonial theory stands for the latest stage in the development of Western colonialism, and removes Western cultural hegemony, which contributes to the realization of cultural diversity (Wang, 2002).

According to Tymoczko (2000), postcolonial writing can be seen as a kind of cultural translation. The postcolonial translation mentioned by Tymoczko is not only the metaphor of postcolonial writing, but also the translation between languages. The concept of cultural translation has been further extended and expanded from the perspective of postcolonial studies. Cultural translation is a cultural writing in a figurative sense. In the era of globalization, large-scale population flow becomes more and more frequent, and “cultural globalization” is bound to occur. In the process of “cultural globalization”, the dominant First World culture always imposes its own cultural values and aesthetic principles on the less influential Third World culture through translation. Translation is an important way of cultural transmission, not only through language, but also through cultural writing or cultural narration. In this case, translation is in fact a kind of writing practice dominated by the more powerful First World culture, which is used to consolidate colonial power.

Interlingual writing can be described as an arena where two cultures clash in the process of cultural translation. Interlingual writing is cultural translation, whereas words are the most basic factor in cultural translation. In interlingual writing, writers consciously or unconsciously use writing and narrative modes approved by strong culture, which can be regarded as a translation of cultural patterns. Undeniably, strong culture is more likely to be regarded as authoritative or classic in cross-cultural communication. In that sense, translation is not the production of a text equivalent to the original, but a means of cultural enrichment, a complex interlingual writing activity. This process has always been accompanied by a balance of power between one culture and another.

Identity Negotiation: Dialogue Based on “Semiosphere”

William Cupach and Tadasu Imahori developed Identity Management Theory (short for IMT) in 1993. (Cupach & Imahori, 1993) put forward that there are three highly interdependent and cyclical stages in intercultural relationships: trial, enmeshment, and re-negotiation. There are some unique features of identity management in each stage. People’s intercultural ability goes and develops through these stages. The first stage involves the process of “trial-and-error” in seeking an identity, in which communicators have something in common. The second stage involves the enmeshment of individuals’ identities into a state of mutual acceptance and convergence, even though their cultural identities are still different. The third stage involves the improvement of the ability of cross-cultural communicators to solve problems and dialectics based on a salient relational identity. The significant feature of communicators in this stage is the integration of signs and rules. These three stages are “cyclical”.

In fact, this “cyclical” phases of cultural identity can be found in some works of diaspora literature. For example, such dynamic changes of cultural identity is embodied in the novel *The Woman Warrior* written by Maxine Hong Kingston. The novel consists of five chapters and is a collection of memoirs by the narrator “I”. This can be viewed as a sign process (i.e., semiosis). In this process, with the exchange of signs, including tangible and intangible, both communicators experience dynamic phases of cultural identity. The story begins with the first story the narrator’s mother once told her, trying to find their similarities and differences. It’s a “trial-and-error” process. Then, when the narrator cries to her parents that she will not be the girl they arranged her to be. She says she doesn’t care about her mother’s opinion because she has American values. This is a classic manifestation of culture shock. Finally, after listening to her mother’s story, the narrator understands the culture of her mother’s time, and reconciliates with her. Obviously, “re-negotiation” of the cultural identity between both communicators can be observed in this phase.

The communication between the daughter and her mother is semiosis. According to the trichotomy of sign put forward by Peirce, the complete sign consists of three elements: (1) representamen; (2) object, (3) interpretant. He adds an intermediate component between signifier and signified emphasized by Saussurean, which is interpretant. Peirce’s semiotics focuses on the thinking process of sign users. He believes a mental effect or a thought must be evoked in his mind, when a receiver of a sign relates it to its object. When the daughter mentioned in the above example communicates with her mother, sign transformation between them is presented through language, but in fact their communication is beyond tangible linguistic sign transformation, involving the clash of values, ideologies and cultures which are all intangible but real existing. Therefore, in the “trial-and-error” phase, conflict occurs when they try to interpret the meaning behind each other’s linguistic signs based on their own knowledge, values and cultures. Why? It’s because that in fact they belong to different “semiosphere”.

The term of “semiosphere” is introduced by [Lotman \(1984\)](#). According to Lotman, any language exists in a semiotic space, and languages are in constant interaction with this space, they can realize their function of signifying something else. As languages do not exist in isolation, but fall in the space where they express a culture where it is embedded, so language is regarded as a code unit, an inextricable operating mechanism. This space is defined as semiosphere. Lotman believes that human beings cannot exist without semiosphere. Semiosphere is a prerequisite for the semiotic act itself. Semiosphere is a semiotic space that is necessary for the existence and functioning of languages and other sign systems. A sign cannot make sense except in the context of other signs. That is to say, a same sign on the surface can be interpreted differently in different semiosphere. The daughter and her mother mentioned in the above example obviously belong to different semiospheres to some extent. So in the first “trial-and-error” phase, when they are attempt to interpret the other party’s linguistic signs based on the culture in their own semiosphere, their sign transformation is bound to fail. However, when they try their best to immerse themselves in the other party’s semiosphere, it’s easier for them to achieve a consensus in the third space where both semiospheres overlap.

Of course, the above examples are not unique. Such sign transformation and cultural identities in different phases can be found everywhere in the literary works of Chinese diasporic translators. For instance, Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990), and Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996) all focus on mother-daughter relationships and could potentially be regarded as dialogues based on “semiosphere”.

Integration of Root Culture and Other Culture

Cultural diversity and heterogeneity can promote readers' curiosity and attraction. Foreign readers are naturally curious about the real-life experience of ordinary Chinese. There are some traditional Chinese classic literary images in the literary works of the Chinese diasporic translators, such as Hua Mulan in Tang Tingting's novel, Guangong in Zhao Jianxiu's work. Chinese history, customs, myths and allusions have penetrated into their works, and become an important approach for readers to contact and understand Chinese culture. The Chinese diasporic translators objectively restore the essence of life from the perspective of ordinary people. Foreign readers are interested in the sour, sweet, bitter, hot, happiness, sorrow and joy of ordinary people. Mundane themes without grand narratives are more down to earth, more intimate, and a less heavy reading experience. National and regional characteristics are the bridge of Chinese literature to the world literature. For example, the story of *The Three-Body Problem*, which successfully went overseas, was set in the political environment of the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese characteristics in these stories not only make the target audience feel strange to different cultures, but also arouse the readers to think about the common living environment of human beings.

In their works, Chinese diasporic translators like to recall the memories of their native land in the way of historical reflection, and evaluate things that happened in their home land from an objective cultural standpoint. In addition, due to the change of current living conditions, the realistic consideration of foreign life has become their focus. In this free state of individual writing, they show the readers their increasingly mature and rational cultural outlook and calm drifting mentality.

The diasporic writing of Chinese diasporic translators tries to jump out of the shackles of immigration literature, not to discuss the cultural and ethnic differences often encountered in the process of immigration, but to try to find human commonalities across ethnic cultures. In this context, it doesn't matter whether the hero of the novel is Chinese or foreigner, whether the story takes place in China or abroad, or whether the author lives in China or abroad. They try to build a common home across Chinese and Western cultures with their own words, and establish a habitat for ideals and spiritual pursuit. Their novels combine "homeland" with "hostland", establish a broader cultural horizon and artistic mode with a broader cultural comparison thinking, and provide a new writing dimension for the Chinese literature world.

They observe Chinese and Western societies and cultures with a more leisurely, free, and open-minded and open attitude. As Diasporas, they want to actively integrate into the host country. In the face of the dominant culture in the Western semiosphere, they use western culture for reference in their own unique way in their works. At the same time, the thousands of years of Chinese cultural tradition makes they always keep the attitude of cultural introspection and reflection. With their creation, they strive to construct the unique ethnic culture in the global multi-culture. At the same time, they also hope to break through the gap between Chinese and Western cultures through their literary works, and form a good situation of mutual integration and communication between cultures. Although in the real world, eastern culture has not achieved equal and harmonious coexistence with western culture, but Chinese diasporic translators can treat the culture of the host country with calm attitude. They made great efforts to strengthen the communication between eastern and western cultures and shorten the period of estrangement and confrontation between them. Of course, this will be a long and arduous task.

Conclusion

The Chinese diasporic translators, as a special cultural community, has a natural advantage in spreading Chinese culture. Their dual-identity endows them with dual-perspective, so they are a special group of translators with dual cultural identity and bilingual cultural consciousness. They go back and forth between ancestral culture and the residential one, forming the space for the cross-culture dialogue. As diasporic translators play a role to bridge two cultures, their diasporic versions are not a simple convey of their homeland culture, but are cultural transplantation.

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