

# A Study on the Construction of the Other in the English Translation of Mai Jia's *Decoded*

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**Abstract:** In 2014, Mai Jia's novel *Decoded* was simultaneously released in multiple English-speaking countries, with the version by Penguin Books in the UK even being included in the Penguin Classics series. Mai Jia thus became the first contemporary Chinese author to be featured in this prestigious library.<sup>[1]</sup> This paper focuses on the English translation of *Decoded* by Olivia Milburn and Christopher Payne, employing the theory of imagology to examine the variations in the portrayal of the other in the translated version and the reasons behind them. The study reveals that the translators predominantly utilize strategies of alienation and literal translation, integrating the other with the cultural features of the target language. However, this integration to some extent diminishes the cultural nuances of the original work, and the reconstruction of the other is a result of the translators' influence from their own social collective imaginary, as well as their emotions, attitudes, and imagination.

**Keywords:** *Decoded*; Mai Jia; other; image variation

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## Introduction

Currently, research on the English translation of *Decoded* in China can be categorized into several types. Firstly, there is a focus on the novel's reception overseas, exploring the reasons behind its success abroad and discussing how the success of the English translation contributes to a new perspective on promoting more Chinese literature globally. When investigating the potential factors for the success of *Decoded* in the West, He Mingxing (2014) introduced the concept of reception screen.<sup>[2]</sup> He argued that the novel became a bestseller in the West due to media hype, where Western media and newspapers, considering Western culture as the center of all cultures, forcefully associated popular events with *Decoded* to attract attention. He pointed out that stereotypical biases form the reception screen through which people perceive the novel.

Secondly, there is an in-depth exploration of the artistic features and literary value of *Decoded*. Wang Li and Liu Changliang (2016) analyzed the translation strategies of metaphors and culturally loaded words, exploring the deep constraints of the translation strategy choices under the guidance of Schema-Instance theory.<sup>[3]</sup> Similarly, Zhai Yaping (2020) discussed conceptual metaphors and conceptual metonymy from the perspective of cognitive linguistics.<sup>[4]</sup> She suggested that cognitive, linguistic, and cultural factors might influence the translation of conceptual metaphors and metonymy.

Moreover, there is research on the translation phenomenon of the English version of *Decoded*. Researchers have delved into the historical evolution of novel translation, translation strategies, and translation effects. Gao Zhixin (2019) mainly discussed how translators handle intertextuality issues and made reasonable judgments about the translation effect.<sup>[5]</sup> He pointed out that the English translation of *Decoded* appropriately dealt with explicit intertextuality and constructive

intertextuality, achieving dynamic effects in terms of intertextual symbolic significance.

This paper will depart from the theory of imagology, analyzing the influence of social collective imagology on the construction of the other. It will explore misinterpretations caused by translator emotional factors. Finally, it will reevaluate the self-image through the lens of the Other, narrating the methods and reasons for constructing the other in the English translation of *Decoded* from these three perspectives. The importance of the interaction between the other and self-image for cross-cultural understanding will be highlighted.

## **2. Construction of the Other in the English Translation of Decoded**

### **2.1 Conflict and Transformation of Social Collective imagination**

The image is the "image of the other", hence it is a cultural fact or a collective image of culture. It occupies a place in the symbolic world and has a function. This symbolic world is called the collective imaginary, and due to its inseparability from social culture, organization, etc., it is also called the social collective imaginary.<sup>[6]</sup> It represents a social collective's way of perceiving and expressing the external world and the other, reflecting behavioral patterns, values, historical memories, etc. In the translation process, translators are influenced by various factors such as their country's social history, cultural background, etc., and they often examine other nations from the perspective of their own social collective imaginary.<sup>[7]</sup> In *Decoded*, when encountering foreign cultural elements that are difficult for the target language readers to understand, translators tend to naturalize the heterogeneous image of other countries to avoid disappointment and confusion in image portrayal. Additionally, the construction of foreign images in the translated version of *Decoded* also reflects the cultural identity and positioning of the translators.

Example 1:

Translation: Zhendi called Mother 'Mummy,' but called Daddy 'Professor' and me 'Sis,' so everything was kind of topsy-turvy. Of course, if you looked at the family tree, I would be one generation senior to him, so by right he should have called me 'Auntie'.<sup>[8]</sup>

Example 2:

Translation: Given his rank, given his age, there were a lot of ways to refer to him: 'Director', 'Boss', 'Sir'. (Milburn & Payne, 2014:142)

Appellation is a way people use to indicate kinship, status, or other relationships, reflecting intimacy or distance between them. Appellation terms not only reflect power and status but also encompass titles, religious beliefs, etc. China's appellation system is different from the West. In the examples above, terms like "Mummy", "Professor", "Sis", "Auntie", "Director", and "Sir" don't have direct equivalents in Western culture. The translator resorts to equivalent terms to bridge the cultural gap, resulting in a transformation of mutual images. In the first example, the translator breaks the hierarchical appellation used in the original, causing confusion in the relationship between the characters. In the latter examples, the removal of 'head chief' and translating "Mr. Zheng" as "Sir" introduces a more official and honorable tone, creating a contrast with Zheng's approachable image. The cultural factors embedded in these address terms are unfamiliar to Western readers, leading to a loss of semantic richness and a weakening of hierarchical and generational relationships between characters.

Social collective imaginary influences how people perceive and understand the external world and the other. In translation, translators often alter culturally loaded words and metaphors with cultural features and ethnic color, acting as filters to retain elements acceptable to the target language country while filtering out others. Typically, culturally loaded words with Chinese cultural elements in the original work are either filtered or translated, weakening the ethnic color and cultural background.<sup>[9]</sup>

Example 3:

Translation: Either this baby is going to be a genius, or a devil. (Milburn & Payne, 2014:16)

The term "emperor" is translated as "genius", influenced by Western mainstream ideologies. This translation, shaped by the translator's cultural background, impacts the cultural significance of the original work. In China, reverence for

emperors has deep historical roots, with imperial power prevailing since the Qin Dynasty. Western ideals of equality and freedom, placing a higher regard for divinity than monarchy, may lead to a misunderstanding of the connotations embedded in the term "emperor". The mother of Da Tougui is a Mathematical genius, and the family expects him to follow suit. The translator omits the incorporation of imperial authority into Chinese popular culture, translating the cultural image of an emperor into that of a genius, diluting the national and cultural context. Western mainstream ideology becomes the authority, depriving readers of the right to understand the history and culture of another nation.

Different customs often have different expressions in language, conveying different meanings.<sup>[10]</sup> In the book, Mr. Yang, the teacher of Rong Jinzhen, is described as intelligent and mysterious due to his ability to dream and foresee the future. People believe he has a "crow's mouth", meaning he speaks ominous words. The translator renders "crow's mouth" as "taking umbrage over his choice of words", losing the imagery associated with the crow, which symbolizes evil, disaster, and misfortune in Chinese culture. The translator's choice results in a bland and limited expression, causing a loss in the construction of Mr. Yang's image.

In addition to expressions with ethnic and cultural colors, it is crucial to consider ideological factors in different historical and cultural contexts. Although image translation may differ from the original work, from the perspective of the translator and readers, the translated images better meet the readers' needs and align with the social cultural context and ideology of the target language. For example, the mention of the Resistance War against Japan:

Example 4:

Translation: In October 1943, Japanese bombing burnt N University to the ground. The remarkable gift that Professor Sir Joseph Larmor had given them, the 1:250 model of Newton's Mathematical Bridge, was destroyed in that fire. (Milburn & Payne, 2014:12)

Since the full-scale outbreak of the war when the Japanese invaded China, the invading forces have adopted brutal and barbaric policies toward the Chinese people. This brutality continued until the Japanese surrender to China in 1945. Therefore, the Chinese people refer to them as "evil" or "Japanese evil", carrying derogatory connotations expressing people's anger and hatred towards these soldiers who ravaged China and its people. In this context, "evil" refers to the inhuman or uncivilized behavior exhibited by the Japanese army on Chinese soil, akin to the actions of devils. In the above example, the translator not only downplays the derogatory nature of "evil" but also removes the words "stupid" and "barbarous" from the original text. The author used these words to express strong dissatisfaction with the Japanese army's bombing of the campus and the destruction of a site witnessing cultural exchanges between the East and West. Their actions not only annihilated a civilization but also intensified the relationship between the Chinese and Japanese peoples, hastening the failure of the Japanese army on the Chinese battlefield. Therefore, the original author considered this act foolish and barbaric. However, in the target language version, the translator not only avoids using the equivalent derogatory English term "Japanese" to translate "evil" but also does not translate "barbarous" and "stupid". During World War II, although Japan was one of the Axis powers, it did not cause any trauma or harm to Britain. Since Japan's surrender in 1945, Japan has been allied with NATO, manipulated by the United States, and has established friendly relations with Britain. There is no animosity or hatred between the two countries. Words such as "barbaric" and "foolish" may become a thorn in the side of target language Japanese readers, and they may also serve as a tool to send provocative signals to Japan. Therefore, the translator sacrifices accuracy, downplays these words, and simultaneously weakens the cruel and barbaric image of Japanese soldiers in the original work, transforming the self in the mirrored image of the other, and reconstructing the cultural identity of the original work.

## **2.2 The ignorance and misreading of translator factors**

Example 1:

Translation: Then I thought about what had happened, thought about the calamity, about the person responsible for it, the mastermind - That bloody thief! (Milburn & Payne, 2014:239)

The protagonist, the genius Rong Jinzhen, loses his sanity after a notebook is stolen by a thief on the train. The thief is

portrayed as lacking morals, greedy, and shameless, directly causing Rong Jinzhen's tragic fate. However, the translator renders the culprit as 'mastermind', a term more commonly used to describe individuals with high intelligence and leadership abilities, such as entrepreneurs, politicians, or strategists. This choice could lead to a misinterpretation, suggesting that the theft was justified, resulting in a loss of the original work's connotations and a misunderstanding of the negative image of the thief.

Example 2:

Translation: To tell the truth, the reason that Young Lillie wanted to change the character in his name was purely out of superstition. In Tongzhen, just like in the rest of the Jiangnan region, there was a popular saying: 'Even the devil is scared of a feminine Main.' That means that when a Main has some feminine quality, he has both yin and yang in his nature and the two complement each other. Strength is complemented by pliability. They thought that this was the way to produce the very best kind of Main – a truly outstanding individual. (Milburn & Payne, 2014:45)

When naming Rong Jinzhen, Young Lillie, out of superstition, wants a name that balances strength and softness, yin and yang. The phrase "Masculine and Feminine Traits" signifies a balance of yin and yang. However, the translator renders it as "feminine Main", a term implying female characteristics misaligned with traditional societal expectations. The term "feminine" typically describes men exhibiting qualities incongruent with traditional male roles, such as gentleness, sensitivity, attentiveness, artistic inclinations, or a preference for feminine attire. As an other cultural reader, the translator evidently misinterprets the meaning of "Masculine and Feminine Traits".

In the translation process of *Decoded*, although it excels in storytelling and requires minimal addition or deletion, there is a sense of loss and neglect due to the lack of communication between the author, Mai Jia, and the translator. The translator seems either uninterested in or unable to appreciate the cultural and aesthetic information of the original work. As a result, certain aesthetic information in the original work may be overlooked, abandoned, omitted, or misunderstood, leading to a transformation of the image of the other. This aesthetic retention effect often manifests as concealed, uneven strength, causing misreading and deviation in the mirrored image of the other.

The portrayal of this deputy division chief in the original text demonstrates the clear differences and conflicts in heterogeneous cultures and highlights the deviation in the perception of heterogeneous aesthetic information.<sup>[11]</sup>

### **2.3 Re-examination of the self within the other**

Example 1:

Translation: Going by what people said later on, he was the first person in the Rong family to break from their mercantile heritage and become an academic, not to mention a great patriot. (Milburn & Payne, 2014:7)

In the original text, metaphoric expressions like "Damp and salty smell" and "Clean and refreshing book smell" are used to describe the transformation of the Rong family's scent. The translation simplifies these metaphors into concrete language, losing the original poetic and cultural nuances. The metaphorical language in the original text conveys the protagonist's shift from a mercantile background to an academic one, emphasizing his intellectual and cultural breakthrough, along with a sense of patriotism. The translation, by using more direct language, overlooks the richness of the original metaphor and fails to capture the deep cultural connotations.

Example 2:

Translation: From his first engagement with BLACK, Rong Jinzhen had a premonition that his attempt to crack it would bring him perilously close to annihilation. (Milburn & Payne, 2014:14)

The original text uses metaphors like "From the slightest hint of wind to the imminent snowfall" and "the danger of the conquered peak being covered" to depict Rong Jinzhen's intuition. The translation simplifies these metaphors, using straightforward language and missing the subtle emotional and artistic expressions present in the original. The original text beautifully connects the character's inner feelings with natural imagery, providing a more resonant and artistic effect. The translation, by opting for a more direct approach, loses the depth and emotional resonance of the original metaphors.

In the construction of other images in the translated version, the unique cultural characteristics and qualities of the native culture become more transparent and observable.<sup>[12]</sup> This reflection prompts a reconsideration and self-reflection of

the self. While the true cultural image may be obscured within the cultural field due to habitual numbness or self-sufficiency, the projection onto the mirror of another culture makes the heterogeneous characteristics and factors exceptionally clear, transparent, and sensitive in the contrasting image.<sup>[13]</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of the translation methods and insights of the other in the English version of *Decoded* reflects on the relationship between the other and the self.<sup>[13]</sup> Through the process of translation, a deliberate use of estrangement strategies and literal translation is observed, leading to a recreation of the other based on the translator's understanding. The cultural images of China in translated literary works may undergo changes influenced by factors such as social collective imaginary and translator elements. Therefore, translators need to deeply examine the meaning and cultural context behind the text to convey more authentic Chinese cultural images to readers of translated works.

The cultural characteristics and language features of the self are reexamined and reflected upon through the lens of the other. The images constructed in the other are difficult to balance with the real self in the original work. This further illustrates the uniqueness and specificity of Chinese language poetics. The true cultural image, often overshadowed by habitual numbness, becomes exceptionally clear, transparent, and sensitive when projected onto the mirror of another culture. This reflection sheds light on the construction and dissemination of the self-cultural image in translation studies, analyzing the interaction mechanism between the translator's choice of translation strategies and image construction. It provides insights into how to effectively showcase the charm of Chinese literary classics and present Chinese civilization to the world in the future.

### Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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