

A Study on the English Translation of National Culture in *Zhao Shutun*

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Abstract: Since the 21st, culture plays a more and more important role on the international stage. China is actively promoting Chinese culture to go global. As a cross-cultural interaction method, translation is of great significance. Chinese literary works is a mirror of the Chinese culture. Therefore, their translation serves as a window for foreigners to insight into China and the Chinese culture. *Zhao Shutun*, as the first renowned classic of the Dai people to be translated from Dai language into Chinese, is qualified to display Chinese culture and national culture. The paper will explore how to translate the culture elements in *Zhao Shutun*, conclude appropriate translation strategies of such national literary works and provide a reference for the Chinese culture going global in the future.

Keywords: *Zhao Shutun*, translation, national culture, the Dai ethnic group

Introduction

Zhao Shutun is one of the renowned classics of the Dai people and the first literary work of the Dai ethnic group to be translated from Dai language into Chinese. It is a folklore poem about a love story, depicting a pure and faithful love of the protagonists, namely, Zhao Shutun, the prince of Mengbanjia and Nan Nuona, the princess of Mengdongban. Meanwhile, it praises the prince for his bravery, faithfulness and perseverance in pursuit of his love, which also reflects the strong will and ideal of the Dai people. Therefore, poem as it is, *Zhao Shutun* is distinctive for including protagonists, antagonists, detailed settings, plot developments, conflicts and resolutions. In 2008, *Zhao Shutun* was listed in the second National Intangible Cultural Heritage list.

Because of the differences in historical background, social customs, religion, culture, ideology and so on, each country and nation has its unique cultural elements. The original text is a well-known narrative poem of the Dai people, where there are a large number of words carrying abundant original cultural information. By this token, *Zhao Shutun* is more a carrier of culture than a poem with elaborate language.

Translation is like transplanting a seed, not simply a copy of the source text^[1]. The task of the translator is to recreate a similar text, reserve the cultural elements and transfer them to target readers. The paper will explore how to translate *Zhao Shutun* full of national culture from three perspectives of religion, custom and totem and conclude appropriate translation strategies of such national literary works so as to serve as a reference for the cross-cultural communication and promote the Chinese culture to go global.

1. Case analysis

1.1 Religion

Translation example^[2]:

He came to the Buddhist temple again

And paid homage to Balanaxi.
Balanaxi was already familiar with him
And narrowed his eyes.

In this stanza, there is a proper nouns associated with religion, which is “Balanaxi”. In order to precisely translate the word, translator should firstly have a deep understanding of the Dai people’s religious culture.

Buddhism originated from ancient India and was gradually divided into Mahayana and Hinayana. According to *Pasatan*, a newly discovered historical book in Dai language, Buddhism was first introduced to the Dai ethnic group in the year 429 of the Buddhist calendar (115 BC). With the transition from primitive society to class society and the establishment of patriarchy, Hinayana played an important role in unifying social ideology and maintaining the ruler order. And it advocated self-liberation and self-salvation, which provided an illusion and comfort of becoming Buddha by virtue of cumulative kindness and enjoying happiness in the afterlife for the Dai people suffering from the class society^[3]. Therefore, the Hinayana conformed to the trend of the Dai and made great difference in the Dai ethnic group. However, according to classical literature and legends of the Dai people, there was a long “Ba La Xi” period before Buddhism became a universal religion. The so-called “Ba La Xi” in Dai language refers to informal monk^[3]. The early Buddhist monks had to isolate themselves in remote mountains and couldn’t live in Dai villages because the Dai people originally had their own religion and couldn’t accept Buddhism immediately.

Meanwhile, the names of characters in *Zhao Shutun* are literally translated from Dai language to Chinese and their identity is of unique significance in the Dai ethnic group. Naming practices helps to both reflect and create conceptions of personal identity^[4]. In order to retain the unique ethnic religious culture, translator should also transliterate the proper noun as Ba La Na Xi or Balanaxi. However, it may be a strange concept for target readers without understanding the Dai people’s religious culture. Therefore, a footnote for the proper noun is helpful. The stanza is translated by the author as follows:

He came to the temple once again,
And visited Ba La Na Xi*.
Having already been familiar with Zhao Shutun,
The monk squinted.

Footnote: Ba La Na Xi is a monk practiced in remote mountains like hermits because at the early introduction stage, Buddhism couldn’t be accepted by the Dai people immediately who had their own religion.

1.2 Custom

Translation example^[2]:
Are you busy embroidering
Or dressing up?
Didn’t you put on your golden flowers
And comb your hair?

The folk handicraft of the Dai ethnic group has been relatively developed since ancient times, and embroidery is a common household skill, which is left by their ancestors. Embroidery is called “xiao” in Dai language and consists in two steps---flower cutting and flower embroidery. Flower cutting is to cut cloth into any desired shape. Then people stick the cut part on a dyed cloth and purfle the shape with strip-like hot gold foil and red thin threads. This step is flower embroidery, which is called “sang” in Dai language. Purfling with hot gold foil makes it difficult for machine to imitate the Dai people’s handicraft^[5].

Embroidery is a collective wealth created by the Dai people in the long-term social practice, which contains rich national culture and give full expression of their national awareness and cultural identity.

In order to preserve and spread Dai people's embroidery cultural, translator should replace "embroidery" with "sang". Meanwhile, considering that the target readers may not be familiar with the original national culture, a footnote for "sang" is necessary. Therefore, the stanza is translated by the author as follows:

Are you busy singing*
Or dressing up?
Haven't you put on your golden flowers,
And combed your long hair?

Footnote: The Dai ethnic group has their own embroidery skills which consist of two steps. The first is to cut cloth into their desired shapes and the second is called 'sang', which means sticking what they have cut on a dyed cloth and purfling the shapes with strip-like hot gold foil and red thin threads.

1.3 Totem

Translation example^[2]:

Ba La Na Xi stood in front of him,
And spoke as if chanting sutras.
"A cloud floated across the Golden Lake.
Once upon a time, a peacock flew across the sky".

In terms of "peacock", the Chinese and western people hold different attitudes. From the perspective of the Chinese people, peacock symbolizes beauty and auspiciousness, so they usually analogize it to beautiful people and things, just as the Dai people call Nan Nuona "Peacock Princess". However, according to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, "peacock" is defined as a vain or ostentatious person. When describing a person proud, arrogant and vain, the western people will say "He or she is proud as a peacock or play the peacock". Considering the cultural difference, translator should replace "peacock" with "phoenix", since in the Dai national culture, Chinese culture or western culture, phoenix is endorsed with the familiar symbolic connotation

Firstly, "peacock" and "phoenix" is of equal significance and have the same symbolism for the Dai people. The bird totem is one of the ancient and indigenous totems, which can date back to the totemic worship of the ancient Yue people, the Dai people's ancestor. The ancient Yue people honor the phoenix with wonderful sound and graceful bearing and believed the phoenix can bring good fortune. The phoenix is called "kai kang han" in Dai language, literally meaning "a chicken with a golden chin"^[6]. As descendants of the ancient Yue people, the Dai people also greatly worship the phoenix. It is said that the peacock is one of the prototype of phoenix. Hence, the Dai people are attached with peacocks.

Secondly, with regard to phoenix, there is something in common in Chinese and Western culture. In the Chinese myths, the phoenix, the king of all birds, is an auspicious bird. *The Classic of Mountains and Seas-Nanshan Jing* and Xu Shen's *Shuowen* emphasize that the appearance of phoenix is a symbol of peace. Guo Moruo firstly proposed the concept of "Phoenix Nirvana". "Nirvana" is Sanskrit, derived from ancient Indian Brahmanism, meaning an elimination of body and spirit to reach a peaceful state of nihilism. The phoenix is endowed with a new image of "rebirth". Through its rebirth from the flames, it metaphorically burns all the shackles of the old society in the flames and obtains freedom and liberation. Scholars hold that Guo Moruo's phoenix nirvana is influenced by and is incorporated into the western "phoenix"^[7]. In the western culture, the earliest account both of its appearance and its behavior occurs in Herodotus, where it is said to be an Arabian bird, eagle-like in appearance but with bright red and gold plumage. The phoenix

may be a literary descendent of the benu or bnw of Egyptian solar myths, a sacred bird which, through association with the self-renewing deities Re and Osiris, became a symbol of renewal of rebirth^[8].

From the mentioned above, to translating “peacock” into “phoenix” will not contort the original information and cause misunderstanding but make up cultural gap and evoke target readers’ emotional resonance. Therefore, the stanza is translated by the author as follows:

Ba La Na Xi stood in front of him.
Like chanting the Buddhist scriptures, he said,
“There was a cloud floating over the golden lake;
There was a phoenix flying over the blue sky.

2. Conclusion

Zhao Shutun is poem carrying national culture instead of displaying elaborate language, where there are many culture-bound terms that are rooted deeply in the Dai culture. Therefore, the translation of *Zhao Shutun* is of great value, which not only introduces the intangible culture heritage of the Dai people to the world, but also displays the cultural diversity of China.

Different people have different cultural backgrounds. From the analysis above, when translating national literary works like *Zhao Shutun*, translator needs to break cultural barrier and explore proper translation strategies. In fact, language, as a carrier of culture, delivers different cultural connotations and embodies different cultural characteristics. Without a full understanding of the original culture, it will be difficult to feel and convey the national culture behind the words. Therefore, when translating works full of national culture, the translator must fully realize the differences in cultural images, carefully choose translation strategies, and appropriately interpret the cultural information of the original language. In addition, adding vivid pictures is an effective method. Only in this way can the national culture of the original language be conveyed, can the cross-cultural communication activities proceed effectively and can the Chinese culture goes global smoothly.

Conflicts of interest

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

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