

A Study on the Translation of Tour Allusions Based on Skopos Theory: Taking the Palace Museum as an Example

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Abstract: China's historical sites, as significant carriers of histories, play a great role in promoting unique Chinese cultures and establishing China's international image. Since international people-to-people exchanges rebounded, they have attracted quantities of tourists from abroad. Allusions of the historical sites are at the core to help foreigners know about history. Therefore, it is worthwhile exploring the translation of these allusions. This paper presents an investigation into the translation of tour allusions utilizing Skopos theory as the theoretical framework. Focusing on the Palace Museum as a case study, the research examines different strategies of translating allusions within touristic contexts. The research finds that literal translation, idiomatic translation, free translation, literal translation with annotation, and transliteration are frequently employed. Based on the analysis of various translation strategies targeted at practical examples, the author proposes that translators should convey cultural connotations and historical references as far as possible while guarantee the translation is suited to target readers' expressions through the flexible utilization of different translation strategies, hopefully advancing cultural communication between China and foreign countries.

Keywords: tour allusions, skopos theory, translation strategy, the Palace Museum

Introduction

Historical sites serve as invaluable repositories of cultural heritage, offering glimpses into the rich tapestry of human civilization. Embedded within these sites are myriad allusions that reflect the historical, cultural, and artistic legacies of past societies. The Palace Museum, located in the heart of Beijing, stands as a typical example of a historical site steeped in cultural significance and adorned with a multitude of allusions. From architectural motifs to symbolic artifacts, the Palace Museum encapsulates centuries of Chinese history and tradition, attracting millions of visitors annually from both domestic and international locales. Hence, translating the allusions encapsulated in the Palace Museum is of great importance. It can foster cross-cultural understanding, help to preserve cultural heritage, and enrich the visitor experience, thereby highlighting the importance of linguistic and cultural mediation in the context of tourism. Yet, the translation of the allusions contained within this iconic site presents translators with a multifaceted task. Translators are faced with the challenges of conveying cultural nuances and historical references effectively while maintaining the linguistic uniqueness, which necessitates a nuanced approach that balances linguistic fidelity with cultural resonance.

Skopos theory, as expounded by German translation scholar Hans J. Vermeer, offers a pragmatic framework for understanding translation as a purpose-driven activity. Grounded in the notion that translation serves a specific communicative function within a given socio-cultural context, Skopos theory underscores the importance of considering

the intended purpose or “skopos” of a translation in guiding the translational process. Within the domain of touristic translation, Skopos theory proves particularly salient, as it directs attention towards the communicative goals inherent in conveying cultural allusions to a diverse audience of tourists.

Currently, a large amount of researches have been done on allusion translation, including that of political documents, literature, poems and speeches delivered by leaders, but it lacks the analysis of allusion translation in the context of tourism. This paper summarizes the characteristics of Chinese allusions, delves into different translation strategies and puts forward several suggestions, employing Skopos theory as a theoretical lens to elucidate the translation process, in order to make allusions better understood by foreign tourists.

1. Characteristics of Chinese allusions

Chinese allusions are deeply rooted in the country’s rich cultural and historical heritages. Many allusions are derived from classical texts such as the Confucian classics, Daoist scriptures, and works of poetry and prose from various dynastic periods^[3]. They are expressed in an euphemistic and implicit way, frequently employing symbolism and metaphor to convey complex ideas and emotions. They may evoke imagery from nature, mythology, or historical events, imbuing them with layers of meaning that resonate with readers familiar with the cultural context. The format of the allusions is very simple, emphasizing linguistic symmetry and neatness. Many of them are composed of four characters, making them concise yet packed with meaning. These characteristics make Chinese allusions different from those of western cultures, which are the summary of Greek mythologies or stories derived from the Bible by and large. In terms of translating allusions, there is always a heated debate over to keep the original linguistic format or guarantee the effective delivery of the connotation is more important.

2. Skopos theory

2.1 Theoretical background

In the 1950s and 1960s, western translation theory was essentially studied from the perspective of linguistics and equivalence theory, mainly investigating the issues of translation from the standpoint of the source text. At the end of the 1970s, Hans J. Vermeer, based on the theory of translatorial action, placed translation within the realm of human behavioral theory for research, proposing that translation is a human behavioral activity, and moreover, a purposeful one. Vermeer’s ideas were further developed and popularized by other scholars, most notably Katharina Reiss and Christiane Nord.

2.2 Theoretical framework

Skopos is the Greek word for ‘aim’ or ‘purpose’, and was introduced into translation theory in the 1970s by Vermeer as a technical term for the purpose of a translation and of the action of translating. It includes three aspects: the purpose of the translator, the communicative purpose of the translated text, and the purpose that a specific translation strategy is aimed at. Vermeer deems that a translation must be “functionally adequate”. Therefore, knowing why an ST is to be translated and what the function of the TT will be is crucial for the translator.^[1] It is a paramount rule that should be taken into consideration at the first place. Apart from that, translation “is an offer of information in a target culture and TL concerning an offer of information in a source culture and SL.” “A TT does not initiate an offer of information in a clearly reversible way and it must be internally coherent and be coherent with the ST”.^[1]

Skopos theory does not stipulate an universal rule that can be employed in the translation process. The translator, in fact, plays an active role in determining the appropriate translation strategy based on the purpose of the target text. This may involve negotiation with clients or stakeholders to clarify the communicative goals and constraints of the translation project. For instance, when translating “Gu Gong”, if the translation aims to emphasize the cultural and historical significance of the site as a museum and showcase of Chinese art and artifacts, “The Palace Museum” would be more appropriate. This translation highlights the role of “Gu Gong” as a cultural institution and destination for tourists interested in Chinese history and heritage. On the other hand, if the translation aims to evoke the imperial history and grandeur of the site, “the Forbidden City” would be a better choice. This translation emphasizes the historical and political significance of the Palace Museum was originally called the Forbidden City. This name originates from the ancient imagination of the

divine world, believing that it was the center of heaven, with the imperial palace located at its center, symbolizing the abode of the celestial emperor.

Skopos theory represents a paradigm shift in translation studies, emphasizing the dynamic and context-dependent nature of translation, as well as the importance of considering the communicative purpose and cultural context of translated texts.

2.3 Principles of translating tour allusions under skopos theory

Skopos theory highlights the following three principles: skopos theory, coherence rule and fidelity rule. The coherence rule states that the TT must be interpretable as coherent with the TT receiver's situation.^[2] In other words, the TT must be translated in such a way that it makes sense for the TT receivers, given their circumstances, knowledge and needs. If the TT does not fit the needs of the TT receivers, it is simply not adequate for its purpose.^[1] The fidelity rule states that there must be coherence between the TT and the ST, or more specifically, between: the ST information received by the translator; the interpretation the translator makes of this information and the information that is encoded for the TT receivers.

In the translation of allusions in tourism, the translation is evidently communicative purpose-oriented. The aim of the tourism texts is to get people across the cultural meanings. According to coherence and fidelity rules, the extent to which translator has to guarantee the linguistic and formal coherence between SL and TL depends on the purpose of the translated text. Therefore, the emphasis of the allusion translation in tourism is not only on formal equivalence, but rather on spreading their cultural connotations. An accurate delivery of the cultural information outweighs the coherence of formality.

3. Research on translation strategies of tour allusions

3.1 Literal translation

Literal translation refers to rendering the allusion into the target language while preserving its original form, structure, and literal meaning as closely as possible. This approach aims to maintain the integrity and authenticity of the original allusion while making it understandable to speakers of the target language. By adhering closely to the original form of the allusion, literal translation allows readers or audiences to access the cultural richness and depth embedded in the original text.

During the Kangxi era, the emperor once held a banquet called "Qian Sou Yan". It refers to a grand banquet hosted by an emperor or a high-ranking official, typically held in the Grand Hall and attended by a large number of esteemed guests, including court officials, scholars, and dignitaries to practice filial piety, establish a communication platform for family affection, create a festive atmosphere and strengthen friendly relationships among neighbors. As all of the guests were the elderly aged over 65 years old, this feast was called "Qian Sou Yan". It is literally translated into English as "Banquet of a thousand elders", which accurately delivers the key information of the participants with the linguistic coherence represented in the TL, making foreigners grasp the distinctiveness of this feast. Another example is "Qin Zheng Qin Xian". In the Hall of Mental Cultivation, the Emperor's throne is set in the middle of the Mingjian, while on the west side of the Mingjian is the Western Warm Chamber. Within the Western Warm Chamber, several rooms are partitioned, among which is a small room where the Emperor reads memorials and holds private discussions with ministers. Above the plaque of this small room are inscribed these four characters. It encapsulates the idea of governing diligently and valuing wise counsel. It also emphasizes the importance of hard work and dedication in governance, as well as the significance of surrounding oneself with capable and wise advisors. Therefore, it is appropriate to translate it as "Diligence in governance, cherishing the wise", which describes the emperor's counsel to himself without any misunderstanding.

Literal translation can be employed in both of these two allusions is attributed to the coherence between their literal interpretations and historical connotations, namely foreign tourists are able to catch the general ideas of the allusions only by their literal meanings. However, it's essential to note that while literal translation can help preserve the original meaning and flavor of an allusion, it may not always produce the most natural or idiomatic language in the target text. In some cases, cultural or linguistic differences between the source and target languages may require translators to balance literal fidelity with readability and clarity in the translation process.

3.2 Idiomatic translation

Idiomatic translation refers to a compromise method used when translating foreign vocabulary. It neither transliterates nor uses new words for translation, but instead adopts a middle-ground approach by using existing words from the target language. In the process of translating from Chinese to English, it means utilizing existing English vocabulary to facilitate understanding for tourists from English-speaking cultures.

The Bell and Drum Tower within the Forbidden City was once the place where the imperial court beat drums and struck bells during royal ceremonies. It has become an important historical site. “Zhong Gu Qi Ming” is a musical performance characterized by the simultaneous playing of bells and drums, often used in royal ceremonies and celebrations in Chinese culture. In Chinese cultural tradition, “Zhong Gu Qi Ming” is frequently employed to enhance the atmosphere of festive ceremonies, elevate the artistic quality of musical performances, and represent an ancient and solemn musical tradition. It also carries connotations of blessings and wishes for people’s peace and safety. A literal translation of it would be “bells and drums sound simultaneously”. However, it fails in expressing the iconic meaning of “bells” and “drums” including auspiciousness, celebration, tradition, unity, protection, and spiritual enlightenment in Chinese cultures, only leaving a picture of the ringing of both bells and drums in the target readers’ minds. Instead, Psalms can be directly used in the translation. “Zhong Gu Qi Ming” can be translated as “the sound of Psalms”, because in Western cultures, the Psalms are cherished for their spiritual depth, emotional honesty, and timeless relevance to the human experience. They offer comfort, guidance, and inspiration to believers of all generations and are considered a source of spiritual nourishment and strength for the faithful. They cover a wide range of themes, including praise, worship, thanksgiving, lament, confession, and wisdom. They are often poetic in nature and are written in various literary styles, such as songs, prayers, and meditations. From this point, they share the similar cultural messages as “Zhong Gu Qi Ming”, much closer to the cultural background of foreign tourists.

3.3 Free translation

Due to the significant cultural differences between Eastern and Western cultures, there are often substantial cultural gaps in both Eastern and Western allusions. Sometimes, when translating Chinese allusions, it's impossible to maintain their specific imagery and meaning. In order to convey the intended meaning to tourists, translators may have to resort to the method of paraphrasing to convey the underlying meaning of the allusions.

The jade seal in the Antiquarium of the Palace Museum was the imperial seal of the Qing Dynasty emperors. It is said that Emperor Qianlong once made an agreement with foreign envoys that only peaceful coexistence could earn them the seal of the jade. This is the origin of “Yu Xi Zhi Yue”. The jade seal is a type of imperial seal historically used by Chinese emperors to authenticate official documents and decrees. Carved from a piece of high-quality jade, these seals were highly prized symbols of imperial authority and legitimacy. In addition to their functional use in official governance, jade seals were also considered important cultural artifacts and symbols of imperial power. They were often bestowed as gifts to loyal officials or foreign dignitaries, symbolizing the emperor’s favor and trust. If it is literally translated as “the promise of the jade seal”, for those who are familiar with Chinese cultures, they may be unsure about whether the jade seal functions as the authority of the decree or the symbol of trust. At the same time, for those who are not familiar with Chinese culture, they may be confused about the iconicity of the jade seal or even worse, misunderstand it as a reason for hope that something good may happen. Therefore, it would be better to translate it as “a divine stamp of peaceful coexistence”. A free translation can faithfully present what the jade seal signifies as well as the specific form of it.

3.4 Literal translation with annotation

The Chinese language and culture are vast and profound, with allusions being particularly condensed. Some Chinese allusions are translated directly, leaving foreign tourists puzzled and unable to understand. To both maintain the characteristics of Chinese language and culture and enable foreign tourists to correctly understand the meaning of allusions, the use of explanatory notes can be employed.

“Zheng Da Guang Ming” is a board hanging over the Palace of Heavenly Purity, which is one of the three residences of emperors during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. It refers to the moral and ethical principles upheld by Chinese feudal emperors. This phrase encapsulates the idea of righteous governance and transparent leadership. In English, it can be literally translated as “uprightness and fairness”. However, it hardly triggers foreigners’ association with any Chinese ancient political systems. Therefore, it is reasonable to supplement “the beginning of Secretly Designated Crown Prince”, reflecting the complicated power dynamic in ancient China. This approach provides a direct translation of “Zheng Da Guang Ming” and a historical background to clarify its connotation in the target language. By doing so, foreign tourists can have a better knowledge about this history.

3.5 Transliteration

The transliteration of allusions directly follows the pronunciation of the allusion, preserving its original characteristics. Transliterating Chinese allusions can maximize the preservation of Chinese national characteristics. Using transliteration is conducive to spreading Chinese native culture to target readers, facilitating the exchange between Chinese and Western languages and cultures, and further promoting the dissemination of Chinese ethnic culture.

Transliteration is mostly applied in translating names of emperors. For instance, when introducing the origin of the plaque of the palaces, such as that of the Palace of Union and Peace for foreign tourists, we will mention “Qianlong” “Kangxi”, who are two important and famous historical rulers of Qing Dynasty in Chinese history. They respectively witnessed Macartney’s visit to China and led to sign the first unequal treaty between China and Western countries—Treaty of Nerchinsk, both of which were important international events taking place in the past which are frequently heard. Moreover, thanks to the successful adaptation of these historical events in the form of TV series or movies overseas, many foreigners have been familiar with these two emperors. Hence, it is reasonable to translate their names according to their phonetic alphabets as “Qianlong” and “Kangxi” without any further explanation.

4. Conclusion

Translation of allusions in tour texts has become an indispensable part of foreign exchange. Different from western allusions, Chinese allusions bear their own distinctive characteristics. Compounded by the cultural difference, translators have to deliver the meanings of allusions at the first place while keep the formal coherence with the ST as far as possible. Meanwhile, the translation strategy translators choose should be weighed from the effective understanding of target readers. Skopos theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the purpose and function of touristic translations, emphasizing the importance of considering the intended audience and context. Under the guide of Skopos theory, the flexible and comprehensive use of literal translation, idiomatic translation, free translation, literal translation with annotation and transliteration are effective strategies for conveying the meaning of tour allusions while preserving the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the original text. Translators have to carefully consider cultural adaptation, audience awareness, clarity and creativity in order to achieve the goal of promoting Chinese history and culture.

Conflicts of interest

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

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