

Fantasy in Translation:

A Study of Two Chinese Versions of *The Lord of the Rings*

FANTASIE DANS LA TRADUCTION:

UNE ÉTUDE SUR LES DEUX VERSIONS CHINOISES DU *SEIGNEUR DES ANNEAUX*

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Abstract: As a great fantasy work, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* enjoys unprecedented popularity in China. However, translating the trilogy into Chinese is far from an easy job. By comparing two Chinese versions of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, this paper analyzes the problems and solutions in translating English fantasy literature into Chinese. It is indicated that the translation of fantasy literature is a complicated process regarding the style, the readership, and the culture background, etc. As fantasy is one of the most important criteria in evaluating the translation of fantasy literature, the key issue lies in how to reproduce the fantasy in the target text as much as possible and make the translated version readable and acceptable as well.

Key words: Tolkien; *The Lord of the Rings*; Fantasy Literature; Translation

Resumé: En tant qu'une grande œuvre de fantaisie, *Le Seigneur des Anneaux* de Tolkien jouit d'une popularité sans précédente en Chine. Cependant, la traduction en chinois de la trilogie est loin d'être une tâche facile. En comparant les deux versions chinoises du *Seigneur des Anneaux* de Tolkien, cet article analyse les problèmes et les solutions dans la traduction de la littérature fantastique anglaise vers le chinois. Il est indiqué que la traduction de la littérature fantastique est un processus complexe en ce qui concerne le style, la lecture, et l'arrière-plan culturel, etc. Comme la fantaisie est l'un des critères les plus importants dans l'évaluation de la traduction de la littérature fantastique, la question clé réside dans la façon de reproduire autant que possible le fantasme dans le texte cible et ainsi de faire la version traduite lisible et acceptable.

Mots-clés: Tolkien; *Seigneur des Anneaux*; littérature fantastique; traduction

1. INTRODUCTION

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The Lord of the Rings, an epic fantasy fiction, was written by J. R. R. Tolkien, professor of philology and Anglo-Saxon language of Oxford University. The story takes place in an imaginary time and place, i.e. the Third Age of Middle-earth. The lands of Middle-earth are populated by Men and other humanoid races, as well as many fantastical creatures. Starting from quiet beginnings in the Shire, the trilogy ranges across Middle-earth and follows the course of the War of the Ring through the eyes of its characters, most notably the central protagonist Frodo Baggins. As a great linguist and writer, Tolkien created various languages for his fantastical creatures through which he showed the readers a marvelous world and successfully embedded the immense historical background. Since its publication, *The Lord of the Rings* has been reprinted numerous times and translated into more than 40 languages, exerting a great influence on modern fantasy literature.

Owing to the great success of the film, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy has gained unprecedented popularity in China. However, translating the trilogy into Chinese is far from an easy job. As a great fantasy work, *The Lord of the Rings* contains lots of fantastical elements. When translating the trilogy into Chinese, one of the most difficult tasks for the translator is to reproduce the fantasy as much as possible. Besides, there are many obstacles in the translation process, e. g. the bondage of the languages, the loss of cultural information in translation, the unfamiliarity with the theme and subject the original text dealing with, and so on. For a better understanding of cross-cultural translation of English fantasy literature, this paper intends to analyze the problems and solutions in translating fantasy literature by comparing two influential Chinese versions of *The Lord of the Rings*, one by Ding Di, Yao Jing-rong, and Tang Ding-jiu published by Yilin Publishing House in Nanjing, mainland China, and the other by Zhu Xue-heng published by Linking Books in Taiwan, China.

2. TRANSLATION STRATEGIES

“Domestication” and “foreignization” are the terms coined by Venuti (1995) to describe the two different translation strategies. The former refers to the translation strategy in which a transparent, fluent style is adopted in order to minimize the strangeness of the foreign text for target language readers, while the latter designates the type of translation in which a target text “deliberately breaks target conventions by retaining something of the foreignness of the original” (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997, p. 59).

Their roots of these terms can be traced back to German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher. In his seminal essay “On the different methods of translation” (1813), he distinguished two distinct translation methods: “either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him” (Venuti, 1995, pp.19-20). Venuti takes up Schleiermacher’s dichotomy of moving the reader towards the author and moving the author towards the reader as a central issue and renders them as “foreignizing” and “domesticating” methods, which have become standard terminology in Western translation studies.

In the wake of the great success of the film, Yilin Publishing House immediately published its Chinese version of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Although this version sold well, most of the readers were not satisfied with it, for the translation seems to be more of a fairy tale than high fantasy. With regards to translation strategies, domesticating translation outweighs foreignizing translation. For instance, Chinese four-character phrases are used quite often in Yilin’s version. For example:

- (1). Hobbits are an unobtrusive but very ancient people, more numerous formerly than they are today; for they love peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside was their favorite haunt.

From Prologue, *The Fellowship of the Ring, The Lord of the Rings* (Vol. I)

Yilin’s version:

霍比特是一個聲名並非顯赫，但歷史極其悠久的民族。較之今日，當初可算得上人丁興旺。他們熱愛和平，勤於耕作，秩序井然，精耕細作的鄉間是他們理想的棲息地。

Zhu's version:

哈比族是群不引人注目，却历史悠久的种族。在古代，他们的数量比目前要多出许多。他们喜欢宁静、祥和及容易耕种的土地：地形平坦和土壤肥沃的乡野是他们最喜爱的地点。

(2). A Knife in the Dark

Title of Chapter 11, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Lord of the Rings* (Vol. I)

Yilin's version: 夤夜劍光

Zhu's version: 黑暗中的小刀

With the use of Chinese four-character phrases, the literary flavor of Yilin's version appears to be stronger. However, it is also noteworthy that the abuse of the four-character phrases damages the style of the target text and makes the translation sound like a traditional Chinese *wuxia* story rather than a western fantasy story.

In comparison, Zhu's version is much more popular with the readers. As a great fan of fantasy stories and computer games, Zhu is well versed in the mythological tradition of western fantasy literature. Therefore, the translation related to western fantasy culture is handled much better and more precisely in Zhu's version. With regard to the difference of these two versions in style, a case in point is the translation of the poem that appears at the beginning of the story.

Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne,
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.
One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them,
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.

From Chapter 2, *The Shadow of the Past*,
The Fellowship of the Ring, *The Lord of the Rings* (Vol. I)

Yilin's version:

三大戒指歸屬天下小精靈諸君，
七大戒指歸屬石廳小矮人列王，
九大戒指歸屬陽壽可數的凡人，
還有一枚屬於高居御座的黑魁首。
莫都大地黑影幢幢。
一枚戒指統領眾戒，盡歸羅網，
一枚戒指禁錮眾戒，昏暗無光。
莫都大地黑影幢幢。

Zhu's version:

天下精靈鑄三戒

地底矮人得七戒
壽定凡人持九戒
魔多妖境暗影伏
闇王坐擁至尊戒
至尊戒，馭眾戒
至尊戒，尋眾戒
魔戒至尊引眾戒
禁錮眾戒黑暗中
魔多妖境暗影伏

Facts show that different translators choose different translation strategies due to various reasons. Some emphasize the faithfulness to the author, and others prefer freedom of the recreation. Therefore, it is not strange that there are different translations with very different styles for one original work. In this case, Yilin's version adopts the form of Chinese modern poetry to translate the original one, while Zhu's version adapts it to a classical poetry form. The former is closer to the form of the source language, while the latter may be more familiar to the target readers from the reception perspective. Therefore, both renderings have their own advantages and disadvantages.

3. TRANSLATION OF PROPER NAMES

Translation of proper names constitutes one of the major obstacles in translating fantasy literature, for proper names in fantasy novels are usually cultural-bound words. What is noteworthy is the translation of the names of species, or more precisely, "races" in fantasy terms. Western fantasy literature has developed a complete system of races in fantasy world, the most common of which are Elf, Dwarf, Giant, Dragon, Demon, Orcs and so on. As these are established concepts in western fantasy, it is better for Chinese translators to have some pre-knowledge about western fantasy tradition. Otherwise, the lack of background information may cause some misunderstanding and then lead to the mistranslation or not-so-proper translation. For instance, "Orcs" (半獸人) is translated as "奧克斯" in Yilin's version. Obviously, such a ridiculous mistake results from the translator's lack of background knowledge about western fantasy literature.

As regards the translation of names of persons and places, literal translation and transliteration are common methods in many cases. According to the "Guide to the Names in *The Lord of the Rings*" written by Tolkien himself, the meaning of the names should be taken into consideration in translation. For example, when translating the name "Butterbur", the translator should take the meaning of "butter" into consideration. Therefore, it is translated as "奶油伯" in Zhu's version. Another example is the translation of the name "Rivendell". While Zhu transliterates it as "瑞文戴爾", it is translated as "林谷" in Yilin's version which expresses its meaning accurately. Although the former may not be as good as the latter in meaning expression, transliteration is feasible in dealing with the name in invented language, for "Rivendell" is a word in Westron language invented by Tolkien.

The names of places should be translated in the same way as well. For example, "Glittering Caves" in both volume II and volume III are translated as "金光洞" or "發光洞". Likewise, Middle-earth is translated as "中土世界", which is the established way to translate this word in fantasy literature. However, it is translated as "莫都大地" in Yilin's version which cannot be denied as a mistranslation.

As a whole, the names in Yilin's version sound somewhat unfamiliar, but just like any other foreign literary work, not particularly like a fantasy novel. In contrast, Zhu's version tries to add meaning into the names, containing enough alienation and maintaining fully or partially the rhetorical effects. As Zhu accumulated enough knowledge about this fantasy work, Elf, Dwarf, Demon, and so on all have their clear

images in his mind. Influenced by computer games to some extent, Zhu's naming sounds more close to those used in computer games, e.g. World of Warcraft.

4. TRANSLATION OF INVENTED LANGUAGES

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien invented 14 artificial languages in total which are important as an inspiration for his imaginary world. As a professional philologist, Tolkien was well versed in the Old English language, and also developed a particular love for the Finnish language, which in part gave rise to Quenya, Welsh, and Sindarin. Both Quenya and Sindarin are two most important Elvish languages in Middle-earth. Apart from these two languages which are relatively the mature ones, Tolkien also invented other languages including Westron spoken by the Hobbit, Khuzdul language spoken by the Dwarves, Valarin, the Valar's tongue, and the Black Speech created by Sauron. These languages are Greek to most of the readers, but Tolkien gave the Pronunciation and Spelling Guide as a part of the Appendices in the third volume of the book, *The Return of the King*. Since every name in every language has its own meaning, the translator should take the meaning of each name into consideration.

Because of the distinctive differences in different language families, the untranslatability does exist in translating invented languages like Elvish or Dwarfish in *The Lord of the Rings*. For example, the Swedish and Dutch translators can make extensive use of Tolkien's own "Guide to the Names in *The Lord of the Rings*", and produce semantic translations for Westron names wherever possible, while retaining the Elvish or Dwarfish names and passages. However, such a method is not feasible for Chinese translators, because they have to use transliteration for many expressions in Elvish and other invented languages in most cases.

5. TRANSLATION OF POEMS

One of the distinguished features of *The Lord of the Rings* is that there are quite a lot of poems, doggerels, songs, and rhymed verses. Due to the linguistic and aesthetic difficulties, Tolkien's poetry is quite complicated, and very probably untranslatable in many cases. As regards poetry translation, it is a difficult choice for the translator to preserve the form or the meaning of the source text. In *A Textbook of Translation*, Newmark noted that "whether a translator gives priority to content or manner, and, within manner, what aspect-meter, rhyme, sound, structure is to have priority, must depend not only on the values of the particular poem, but also on the translator's theory of poetry. Therefore, no general theory of poetic translation is possible...Deliberately or intuitively, the translator has to decide whether the expressive or the aesthetic function of language in a poem or in one place in a poem is more important" (Newmark, 1988, pp. 165-166). Hence, the translator should take the function of language into consideration when translating a poem. For example:

The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with weary feet,
Until it joins some larger way,
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? I cannot say

From Chapter 3, Three is Company,
The Fellowship of the Ring, The Lord of the Rings (Vol. I)

Yilin's version:

路從家門起，
不知多少裡。
前頭綿綿路，
緊走不將息。
匆匆復匆匆，
小路接通衢。
歧路交叉處，
彷徨又遲疑。

Zhu's version:

大路長呀長，
從家門伸呀伸。
大路沒走遠，
我得快跟上，
快腳跑啊跑，
跑到岔路上，
四通又八達，川流又不息，
到時會怎樣？我怎會知道

This poem is a song sung by Bilbo, followed by Frodo, Sam and Pipe in delighted mood, when they just left home but still in the territory of Shire and the Nazguls have not appeared yet. From the above we can see that Yilin's version adopts the traditional Chinese five-character style while Zhu's version is in a relatively loose pattern. As it is a song sung in a happy mood, Zhu's version seems to be more suitable in the context than Yilin's version, for a formal poetic style is a little out-of-place here. It is undeniable that Yilin's version is perfect in the poetic form, but it sacrifices the accuracy of the meaning for a good structure. When comparing the source text and the target text, it is easy to find that there are some mistranslations in Yilin's version, while Zhu's version conveys the meaning of the original poem more precisely, yet less well structured in the form. Thus we can draw a conclusion that Yilin's rendering is more of the aesthetic function while Zhu's translation more of the expressive function. Anyway, there are still some successful examples in which the form and the meaning are well preserved. Here is a case in point :

Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing?
Where is the helm and the hauberk, and the bright hair flowing?
Where is the hand on the harp string, and the red fire glowing?
Where is the spring and the harvest and the tall corn growing?
They have passed like rain on the mountain, like a wind in the meadow;
The days have gone down in the West behind the hills into shadow.
Who shall gather the smoke of the dead wood burning,
Or behold the flowing years from the Sea returning?

From Chapter 6, The King of the Golden Hall,
The Two Towers, The Lord of the Rings (Vol. II)

Yilin's version:

烈馬騎手現在哪裡，長鳴的號角在何家？
頭盔鎧甲現在哪裡，還有那飄逸的秀髮？
豎琴之手現在哪裡，還有跳動的殷紅火花？
春天在哪裡，還有高粱玉米、豐收年佳？
雨行高山，風吹草上，什麼也沒留下，
白日落西山，只有朦朧的陰影生髮。
枯木遭焚，誰會去收集滾滾黑煙？
遊子歸家，誰還能盡數似水年華？

The poem is full of literary grace, precise in the diction and well structured in the form. By employing the vivid images such as “烈馬”，“長鳴的號角”，“頭盔鎧甲”，“飄逸的秀髮”，“殷紅火花” and so on, the translator represents the artistic beauty of the poem in Chinese. Besides, the rhythms and rhymes of the poem are transferred by using “家”，“髮”，“花”，“佳”，“下”，“發”，and “華” to achieve the sound effect.

6. CONCLUSION

As a genre, fantasy literature has a short history of only several centuries, but its roots can be traced back to ancient mythology. In the second half of the 20th century, fantasy literature ushered in a golden age with the publication of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. After the great success of the movie, the number of its fans and readers is growing rapidly in China, but the translation of fantasy literature is far from satisfactory, which cannot meet the readers' demands and hinders the development of fantasy literature in China. By comparing two influential Chinese versions of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, this paper analyzes the problems and solutions in translating English fantasy literature into Chinese. It is indicated that the translation of fantasy literature is a complicated process regarding the style, the readership, and the culture background of the text, etc. As fantasy is one of the most important criteria in evaluating the translation of fantasy literature, the key issue lies in how to reproduce the fantasy in the target text as much as possible and make the translated version readable and acceptable as well. The translation of fantasy literature is quite different from the general literary translation, although they have much in common with each other. Apart from translation skills, the interests in fantasy literature and its translation as well as literary accomplishment are also very essential to be a successful fantasy literature translator.

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