

## On Translating Chinese Proverbs or Idioms in the Cross-Cultural Perspective

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### Abstract

Translating Chinese idioms is regarded as one of the greatest challenges, because Chinese idioms are a reflection of the rich cultural heritage of China, and most of them are not always easy to understand in lack of Chinese cultural background. This paper discusses two strategies of translating Chinese idioms. In order to introduce Chinese cultures to the foreigners, we prefer to the strategy of foreignization based on keeping to the functional equivalence in the cross-cultural perspective.

**Key words:** Chinese proverbs or idioms; Cross-cultural communication

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### INTRODUCTION

Normally, translating Chinese idioms is regarded as one of the greatest challenges, because Chinese idioms are a reflection of the rich cultural heritage of China, and most of them are not always easy to understand in lack of Chinese cultural background. And without understanding there can be little appreciation. Therefore, the translation of Chinese idioms involves many a problem, such as culture, literal translation or liberal translation, the response of

original readers or readers of the translated text, the differences between Chinese and English and so on.

### 1. TRANSLATING STRATEGIES

As it can be seen, there are two strategies of translating Chinese idioms. One is domestication; the other is foreignization.

#### Domestication vs. Foreignization

Domestication focuses on standard target language, trying to locate the similar idioms which have the closest collocation to the original language in the target language. However, foreignization focuses on literal translation, retaining the original form and cultural elements, providing the translation readers with the different emotional appeals. As to the two translation methods, different people have different views. QIAN Zhongshu upholds the former, but LU Shun upholds the latter. Theoretically speaking, the latter method keeps the form and cultural elements of the original text, which is worth assuming, because the first-rate translation is to realize functional equivalence – not only the equivalent content of message, but, in so far as possible, an equivalence of the form. However, as to Chinese idioms, which are deeply embedded in Chinese culture, and culture is a hard nut to crack in foreignization. As a matter of fact, there exists a lot of English idioms similar to Chinese ones, assuming domestication is quite acceptable, and the translation readers' response is almost as same as the original readers. While discussing which method is superior to which, we list out the translation examples of some idioms in *The Story of the Stone*. Maybe we can make a sense how to make the best translation of idioms in Chinese literature.

树倒猢猻散

Trees fall and monkeys scatter (foreignization)

Rats desert a falling house (domestication)

Nida has pointed out in his *The Theory and Practice of*

*Translation* that the old focus in translation was the form of the message, and translators took particular delight in being able to reproduce stylistic specialties ... the new focus, however, has shifted from the form of the message to the response of the receptors. Therefore, what one must determine is the response of the receptors to the translated message. This response must then be compared with the way in which the original receptors presumably reacted to the message when it was given in its original setting.

Following Nida's dynamic equivalence, we can find that the above two translations faithful, expressive and elegant, and both the original readers and the translation readers will have the same response. The translation based on foreignization retains the original stylistic specialties, representing Chinese thinking potency, and the translation based on domestication reflects English thinking potency and English culture – an ocean country characterized with ocean cultures, and we can see many idioms in English are connected with ocean cultures. For example: we say “drink like a buffalo” in Chinese, while English people say “drink like a fish”, both mean drinking gallons. Obviously, different cultures lead to different thinking potencies, and different potencies lead to different expressions in language. As we can see, if receptors of the translated message can have the same response to the translation as the original readers to the original message, either foreignization or domestication is acceptable in translating Chinese idioms into English, although different people have different preference, it is hard to say which is superior to which. However, as we have mentioned, people of different cultures have their unique thinking potency, not all Chinese idioms can be translated in the method of domestication. For example:

**谋事在人，成事在天。**咱们谋到了，靠菩萨保佑，有些机会，也未可知。（曹雪芹，《红楼梦》）

Man proposes, God disposes. Work out a plan, trust to Buddha, and something may come of it all you know. (domestication) (David Hawkes)

It is well known that the above Chinese idiom has the English equivalent “Man proposes, God disposes”. Either in the content or in the form, the translation is equivalent to the original text. However, the translation is unacceptable, because the shock of religious culture arises in the translation. God is the Supreme Being, creator and ruler of the universe in Christianity, Judaism and Islam, but Buddha is in the religion of Buddhism. And in Chinese culture, the Supreme Being is not God or Buddha but Heaven. The translation adopted in the strategy of domestication seems awkward, and the readers of the translated text will feel it funny, even offending. Therefore, we have to abandon the seemingly equivalent translation of domestication and change the translation into the following translation of foreignization:

Man proposes, Heaven disposes. Work out a plan, trust to Buddha, and something may come of it all you know. (foreignization) (Hsien-yi Yang)

As it can be seen, adopting foreignization in translating the above Chinese idiom, we can not only retain the original figurative expression, but also provide the readers of the translated text with a special way to understand and appreciate Chinese cultures and unique stylistic specialties. Another example goes:

你自己手里拿着这个，岂不好？明儿再送来——就失了手也有限的，怎么忽然有变出这“剖腹藏珠”的脾气来！（曹雪芹，《红楼梦》）

Wouldn't that be better? You can send it back later. And even if you drop it, it won't matter. What's come over suddenly that you want to “cut open your stomach to hide a pearl”? (Hsien-yi Yang)

We translate literally the above Chinese idiom in the method of foreignization without any explanation “sacrifice life for money”, the readers of the translated text can understand and appreciate the meaning of the idiom. Here are more good translations in the method of foreignization in the novel of *A Dream of Red Mansions*:

(1).....竟如“槁木死灰”一般.....

...not better off than withered wood or cold ashes...

(2).....癞蛤蟆想吃天鹅肉.....

...a toad hankering for a taste of swan...

(3)吃着碗里看着锅里。

keep one eye on the bowl and the other on the pan.

(4)俗话说，“入乡随乡”.....

As people say, “other countries, other ways”...

(5)天下乌鸦一般黑。

All crows are black the world over.

(6)真俗话说，“各人有缘法。”

As the proverb says, “The fortune of each is predestined.”

(7)狗嘴里还有象牙不成！

One doesn't expect ivory from a dog's mouth!

(8)人急造反，狗急跳墙。

Desperation drives me to rebel and a dog to jump over a wall.

(9)自古说，“妻贤夫祸少，表壮不如里壮。”

As the saying goes, “A good wife keeps her husband out of trouble – a sound woman counts for more than a sound man.”

(10)可是你“只许州官放火，不许百姓点灯。”

You're like “the magistrate who goes in arson but won't allow common people to light a lamp.”

(11)俗话说，“拼着一身剐，敢把皇帝拉下马。”

As the proverb says, “One who will risk being sliced to pieces dare unsaddle the Emperor.”

(12)俗话说，“嫁出去的女儿，泼出去的水。”

As the saying goes, “A married daughter – split water.”

(13)俗话说，“人怕出名猪怕壮。”

“Bad for a man to be famed, bad for a pig to grow fat.”

(14)清官难断家务事。

Not even good officials can settle family troubles.

## 2. CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION-ORIENTED METHOD

Although we can adopt the method of foreignization to translate most Chinese idioms, retaining the original figurative expressions, representing unique Chinese specialties, yet some Chinese idioms, embedded in Chinese culture or involved in Chinese historical background, even without any cultural background,

can not be translated in the method of foreignization, otherwise, misunderstanding and ambiguity will arise to the readers of the translated text. For example:

胸有成竹—to have a sea of bamboo in one's stomach  
开门见山—to open the door and see the mountain

The first idiom involves a Chinese story – a painter knows quite well all kinds of bamboo in his mind before drawing a picture of a bamboo, so he is able to draw a bamboo without any thought. Without knowing the story, how can the translation readers understand what “have a sea of bamboo in one's stomach” means. The second idiom without any cultural background, only reflects Chinese thinking potency, meaning doing something in a direct way not in a roundabout way. Obviously, the translation “to open the door and see the mountain” must be awkward to the translation readers, without the same response as the original readers to the vivid expression. So we have to abandon the translation of foreignization, and turn to domestication, sacrificing the vivid expression for the sake of communication.

胸有成竹—to have a well-thought-out plan before doing something  
开门见山—to come straight to the point

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## CONCLUSION

Well, we have briefly discussed the two strategies of translating Chinese idioms into English, but we may still be at a loss which method is superior to which. As a matter of fact, no method of translation is universally applicable and workable. Following Nida's dynamic equivalence, we should try to focus on our readers of the translated text, not solely on the text itself. Keeping this principle in our mind while translating Chinese idioms, we can easily decide which strategy is applicable to produce a first-rate translation of Chinese idioms. Admittedly, if the translation of foreignization can bring

the readers of the translated text the same response to the translation as the original readers to the original text, we prefer to adopt the method of foreignization, which can keep dynamic equivalence in the translation, most importantly, the translation properly represents Chinese stylistic specialties, leaving the readers a feeling of the Orient not the Occident. While reading the translated text of Chinese, they will, more or less, have the feeling of reading the original Chinese text not the translation. As the above example goes, we translated Chinese idiom “入乡随俗” into “other countries, other ways” in the method of foreignization, not in the method of domestication, “do in Rome as Romans do”. Although the translation of foreignization is not as standard as the one of domestication in terms of language expression, it is natural to the readers of the translation, and they will not feel bewildered how a Chinese can speak in the way of the Westerners do. In this case, we can see the translation in the method of foreignization focuses better on the interests of the translation readers, retaining the Chinese culture as well as keeping to the functional equivalence.

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