



A Comparative Study of Folk Culture Translation from the Perspective of Cultural Presupposition

—Taking Four English Versions of *Biancheng* as an Example

Ningning Wang

Department of Foreign Languages, East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Email: elainewang66@foxmail.com

How to cite this paper: Wang, N.N. (2020)

A Comparative Study of Folk Culture Translation from the Perspective of Cultural Presupposition. *Open Access Library Journal*, 7: e6397.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1106397>

Received: May 6, 2020

Accepted: May 26, 2020

Published: May 29, 2020

Copyright © 2020 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

The rich cultural presuppositions contained in Chinese folk culture have important values in the translation of folk culture and cross-cultural communication. In order to explore how the translator deals with the cultural presupposition, this paper takes the concept of cultural presupposition as the starting point and adopts qualitative research and case study methods to make a multidimensional comparative analysis of the translation of folk culture involved in the four English versions of *Biancheng*, which finds that Jeffrey C. Kinkley usually takes compensatory methods to achieve the equivalent of cultural presuppositions; Gladys Yang is loyal to the original text, while omits some folk culture details; Emily Hahn and Shing Mo-Lei, Ching Ti and Robert Payne may not have a thorough understanding of the cultural presuppositions implied in the original text. In order to achieve the equivalent of cultural presupposition, and help to eliminate the information and meaning gaps in the spread of folk culture for the target language readers, translators need to take the compensatory methods like interpretation in the text and then establish semantic coherence, so as to achieve the purpose of transmitting Chinese folk culture.

Subject Areas

Linguistics, Translation

Keywords

Cultural Presupposition, Folk Culture, English Versions of *Biancheng*

1. Introduction

Folk culture is a custom formed by a country or a nation in the long-term social production and life, which is an important way to show the traditional Chinese culture. As a kind of collective cultural accumulation and common cultural phenomenon, it is a vivid embodiment of the national cultural spirit. What's more, it is rich in historical accumulation and has distinct characteristics of the times. It is a knowledge system created by the people through the ages, and also a cultural model passed down by people in their daily life through oral and behavioral ways [1]. Folk culture is not only a social ideology, but also a cultural heritage with a long history. Due to the differences of historical culture, geographical characteristics and economic development, each nation has its own unique folk culture. In the context of advocating Chinese culture to go global, the demand for folk culture output is increasing day by day. Therefore, the translation and introduction of folk culture will undoubtedly promote the interaction and exchange between cultures, and promote the construction and integration of local cultural system and world cultural system [2].

Most of the existing studies emphasize the strategies and principles of the folk culture translation, focusing on the interpretation of folk literature translation from a cultural perspective. Yu Jie and Tian Xia pointed out that the best relevant presupposition could be discovered in a dynamical and hierarchal way in order to give it prominence, and put forward the translation methods such as literal translation, semantic enrichment, target-transference and abridgement [3]. Jiang Zhihui, taking the folk culture translation in Zhejiang as an example, put forward the translation strategy of retaining the cultural elements of the source language and focusing on the foreignization [4]. Sun Nairong and Shi Gengshan put forward two translation strategies of "seeking the same" and "reserving the differences". "Seeking the same" refers to properly translate the original text of folk culture and spread the differences of cultures. "Reserving the differences" refers to fully understand the Chinese folk culture and use various translation strategies to retain the cultural characteristics [2]. In a word, the existing studies are mainly based on the summary of specific translation strategies, while the selection of research perspective and the content are still limited. Besides, the research on folk culture translation from the perspective of cultural presupposition is lacking, both the depth and width need to be further explored. The concept of cultural presupposition plays an important role in the translation of Chinese works. Taking "cultural presupposition" as the starting point, we can explore how the translators grasp the source language and how can the target readers better understand and accept the folk culture conveyed by the translated text. *Biancheng*, as one of the representative works of Shen Congwen, depicts a pure love story of boatman's granddaughter Cuicui and describes the unique charm and customs of the Miao nationality. This paper will make a descriptive comparative analysis of the translation of folk culture in the four English versions of *Biancheng*, including the festival, architecture, marriage and love, mus-

ical instrument and religion folk culture of Miao nationality in western Hunan, so as to explore the advantages and disadvantages of each translator in the translation of folk culture, and explain the translator's best way to deal with the cultural presupposition in the translation of folk culture.

2. Cultural Presupposition and Translation of Folk Culture

Translation is a kind of cross-cultural communication activity; the largest obstacle is the transmission of heterogeneous culture, which is due to the different cultural presuppositions used by the source language readers and the target language readers. Cultural presupposition refers to "the assumptions, beliefs and viewpoints rooted in a culture shared by people but existing in a potential form" [5], which means it plays an important part in the process of meaning inferring and can influence the reader's coherent comprehension of the original text's information. Readers with similar cultural presuppositions have similar understanding ability to the text, and can understand the cultural connotation of the text well. Therefore, cultural presupposition is the key to the translator's understanding, the transformation of the source text, and the target language reader's understanding and acceptance of the translated text. As Peter Fawcett said in *Presupposition and Translation*, translators need to know not only what presupposition information is lacking in the target culture, but also what presuppositions exist in that culture which may have a proactive impact on translation [6].

China has colorful folk culture. With a good understanding of all ethnic groups, we can grasp the cultural presupposition implied in folk culture and achieve successful communication in folk culture. The process of translating Chinese folk culture into English is equivalent to the process of spreading folk culture. In the introduction of folk culture, the meaning part in the form of presupposition is a part of the context [7], if presupposition is not shared by the target language readers, then translators need to take effective measures in translation, not only to accurately convey the basic information of the folk culture, but also to analyze the cultural presupposition and determine the way to deal with it, and finally decide which translation strategy to adopt [8]. A good translation of folk culture will help to successfully display and spread the distinctive Chinese folk culture, help the readers to eliminate the information and meaning gaps in the transmission of folk culture, help to establish the semantic coherence, and achieve the purpose of cross-cultural communication.

3. Comparison of Folk Culture Translation

There are four English versions of *Biancheng* since the original work's publication. The first English version *Green Jade and Green Jade* was translated by American writer Emily Hahn and Chinese writer Shing Mo-Lei, it was published in *T'ien Hsia Monthly* in 1936; the second English version titled *The Frontier City* was jointly translated by Chinese translator Ching Ti and American writer Robert Payne and published in 1947; the third English version is called *The*

Border Town, which was translated by a British translator lived in China named Gladys Yang, and was one of the *Panda Books* published in China in 1981; the fourth English version titled *Border Town* was translated by Jeffrey C. Kinkley, an American Sinologist, and was published in 2009 [9]. The comparative studies of the folk culture translation in the four English versions of *Biancheng* are as follows, and the different versions will be sorted in chronological order.

3.1. Festival Folk Culture

Original: ……额角上用雄黄蘸酒画了个王字[10]。

Version 1: ... painted the character “Wong” with orpiment wine on their foreheads, like this—王—because tigers wear this pattern of wrinkles on their brows, and they thought it would frighten away all the devils who come out for the Dragon Boat Feast [11].

Version 2: ... wrote the character “Wang” on their foreheads with orpiment wine [12].

Version 3: ... paint the character for “king” on their foreheads with a mixture of realgar and yellow wine [13].

Version 4: ... painted the character wang, or “king,” on their foreheads using wine mixed with realgar [14].

Realgar is a kind of medicinal material. It is said that it can protect people from poisonous substances. Therefore, in the Dragon Boat Festival, people use realgar wine to draw the Chinese character “王” on children’s heads, which can not only use realgar to drive away poisonous substances, but also use the word “王” (like tiger’s forehead pattern) to represent the fierce tiger to suppress evil. Due to different historical, economic and cultural backgrounds, the target language readers may know little about the lifestyle and customs of the source language people, which forms the particularity and uniqueness of folk culture translation. Therefore, taking the target language readers’ understanding into consideration, we should add translation and interpret it properly on the basis of retaining the original meaning, so as to make it clear and easy to understand. In He Ziran’s opinion, different nations have different ways of thinking, so there are also differences in the ways of language expression that reflect thinking. People who speak Chinese or English have different understanding of pragmatic presuppositions due to different ways of thinking. People speaking Chinese may think that some information is self-evident premise and does not need to be expressed in the language; but people speaking English may think it is necessary to show it in the language and even emphasize it [15], that is to say, the translator needs to increase the cultural presupposition for the target readers to help them understand the folk culture conveyed by the original text correctly.

It can be seen that in the four translations, only Emily Hahn and Shing Mo-Lei’s version can achieve this accurately, they retain the font of the Chinese character “王”, rather than presenting the word in the transliteration way

“Wang” or in the literal translation way “king”, because only the font of the Chinese character “王” is like the forehead pattern of a tiger, and only with detailed explanation, can the target language readers associate with realgar driving away poisonous substances and fierce tiger suppressing evil. However, the other three versions ignore that the target language readers use the language of English, they do not have the same cultural background and preset cognition as the source language readers, if it is directly translated into “Wang” or “king” without the supplementary translation in the text to explain its specific meaning, it will be hard for the target language readers to know what the text is talking about.

3.2. Architecture Folk Culture

Original: 河街有熟人的, 可到河街吊脚楼门口边看……[10]

Version 1: If they had friends living in River Road they sat in the hanging rooms ... [11]

Version 2: Those who had acquaintances in River Road would enjoy the race from windows overlooking the river ... [12]

Version 3: Those with friends on the waterfront may go there ... [13]

Version 4: If they knew people on River Street, they could watch from the houses on stilts overhanging the river ... [14]

“吊脚楼” is one of the distinctive buildings of the Miao nationality. The front row of the building is supported by long wooden columns. Its formation is attributed to historical factors on the one hand, and to the natural conditions of the mountain on the other hand, which is a unique kind of stilt style architecture.

In the four English versions, Ching and Payne’s translation uses “windows overlooking the river” to implicitly explain the building is built near the water, while does not translate the name of Miao’s typical building. Similarly, Gladys Yang directly uses “there” to explain the whereabouts of the people watching the boating, while omits the translation of the word “吊脚楼”, without any explanation of the unique traditional architecture of Miao nationality. Such a way of translation greatly reduces the folk culture conveyed in the original text. In the process of folk culture translation, the translator should not only accurately and faithfully convey the basic information of “what is it”, but also analyze the cultural presupposition contained in it, determine the way to deal with the cultural presupposition, and finally decide which translation strategy to adopt [8]. What’s more, the word “hanging room” in the translation of Hahn and Shing also needs to be analyzed. Although “hanging” means something is suspended, it is far from the characteristic of a stilted building with long woods supporting half of it. In contrast, “the houses on stilts overhanging the river” in Kinkley’s translation obviously answers the question of “what is it”, and better conveys the meaning of this architectural folk culture on the basis of the preset cognition of the target language readers.

3.3. Love and Marriage Folk Culture

Original: 且如何同父亲在未认识以前在白日里对歌……[10]

Version 1: and how she used to sing together with Ts'ui Ts'ui's father in the daytime ... [11]

Version 2: and how her mother and her father sung together in the days before they knew one another ... [12]

Version 3: Before she ever set eyes on Emerald's father she was answering his songs ... [13]

Version 4: how she and Cuicui's father had sung love songs to each other in broad daylight before they ever met ... [14]

Singing in antiphonal style is the most distinctive custom of Miao nationality when people fall in love. Since ancient times, Miao people advocate freedom and autonomy in marriage. Although the phenomenon of parents arranged marriage also exists, it can go hand in hand with young people's independent marriage. This form of conveying feelings in western Hunan originates from the most simple and primitive human needs for mate selection. Through the "song of passion under the sun" and "song of tenderness under the moonlight", they can test each other's intelligence and feelings. Therefore, singing in antiphonal style is not only a great competition of intelligence, but also a reflection of the love ability without affectation [16].

The translation of "对歌" shows the different ways of love and marriage folk culture translation. Hahn's version and Ching's version translate the word "对歌" into "sing together", which doesn't show the characteristic of singing to each other's tune. Kinkley's translation of "sing love songs to each other" adds cultural presupposition for the target readers, while "answer his songs" in Gladys Yang's translation better reflects the mutual response of men and women in singing, and fully restores the process of Miao men and women communicating with each other in the singing sound. In the song, both the hearts of men and women are getting closer.

3.4. Musical Instrument Folk Culture

Original: 同一个用生牛皮蒙好绘有朱红太极图的高脚鼓……[10]

Version 1: and a drum covered with cowhide, painted with the red life-symbol ... [11]

Version 2: and a drum which was provided with legs, and with a drumhead made of raw cowhide painted over with a vermilion-coloured representation of the celestial sphere ... [12]

Version 3: and a big oxhide drum painted with a red diagram of the yin and yang ... [13]

Version 4: and a drum on legs, whose rawhide drumheads had the circular yin-yang symbol painted in vermilion ... [14]

Miao drum is the representative musical instrument in western Hunan, in the Dragon Boat Festival, Miao drum plays a role of commanding rhythm and ex-

aggregating atmosphere. Miao drum is not only the sacred thing and the spiritual connotation of Miao people, but also the symbol of Miao culture. What's more, the ancient Chinese cultural symbol “太极图” is added in the culture of Miao drum. “太极图” is the origin of “eight trigrams diagram”, a round pattern of yin and yang fish intersecting heads and tails, which is used to explain the universe phenomenon in the old times.

Cultural presupposition plays an important role in people's understanding of the form and content of information. In the process of spreading folk culture, in order to avoid the difficulties in the target language readers' understanding, and to enlarge the effect of folk culture communication, it is advisable to adjust the original cultural presupposition properly in translation practice, and highlight the effective and key cultural presupposition in the translation through rewriting. On this level, in order to cater to the cultural presupposition of the target language readers, Gladys Yang and Kinkley translate “太极图” into “diagram of the yin and yang” and “the circular yin-yang symbol”, which make it easier for the target language readers to associate with the pattern of “yin and yang fish”, while the “life-symbol” and “representation of the celestial sphere” in Hahn and Ching's translations will lose the effect of the spread of folk culture because of the different cultural presuppositions of the target readers. In addition, Emily Hahn and Gladys Yang omit the translation of the word “高脚”, which is used to describe the characteristic of drum supported by long legs. In the process of folk culture translation, it is the most basic principle to accurately and faithfully convey the content of the original text, such kind of translation processing method decreases the Miao drum culture conveyed by the original text.

3.5. Religion Folk Culture

Original: ……他把长子取名天保，次子取名傩送[10]。

Version 1: ... he named the elder one T'ien Pao, which means Ward of God, and the younger one Tan Sung, the Devil's Gift [11].

Version 2: ... he named the elder Tien Pao, which means “Protected by Heaven,” and the younger Nu-sung, which means “Sent by the Plague-god” [12].

Version 3: ... giving him the name No-sung his brother that of Tien-pao [13].

Version 4: ... led him to name the elder son Tianbao (Heaven-protected), and his younger brother Nuosong (Sent by the Nuo Gods) [14].

From the perspective of religious genesis, the religion of Miao nationality in western Hunan is a kind of original religion based on the concept of animism. From the level of its essential characteristics, the religion of Miao nationality shows its belief in mysterious supernatural power [17]. Its main characteristics are the figurativeness of belief expression, strong clan consciousness, unique view of ghosts and gods, strong secularity [18] and other aspects. In the folk culture of Miao nationality in western Hunan, Nuo gods refer to the gods who dispel the plague and they are highly respected and loved by the Miao people. In *Biancheng*, Shunshun has two sons, but he dotes on the second son a little. So he

named the first son Tianbao and the second son Nuosong, which means that one who was protected by Heaven may still be troubled by human affairs, but one who was sent by Nuo gods must be immune from them [10]. It can be seen that the name “Nuosong” is full of religious meaning, and the translations of the name “Nuosong” in the four versions are different from each other.

The four versions basically adopt the transliteration method, except Gladys Yang’s translation, the other three translations all explain the connotative religious meaning of “傩送”. “傩 (nuo)” is a rarely-used Chinese character, which may cause the misunderstanding of the pronunciation of the character “傩 (nuo)”. For example, in Hahn’s translation, this name is translated into “Tan Sung”. In addition, in Hahn’s and Ching’s translations, the word “傩 (nuo)” is interpreted as “Devil” and “Plague-god” respectively, which are contrary to the meaning of Nuo gods. In contrast, Kinkley keeps the cultural presupposition contained in Nuo directly in the way of foreignization. While if the annotation of “gods who drive away pestilence” is added in the text, it will be more helpful for the target readers to understand. The transliteration method is used more frequently in the translation of the names of gods, people or objects with folk cultural characteristics when they first appear. After adding cultural presupposition through annotation or interpretation, when the name reappears in the following text, the transliteration method can be used directly, which can not only ensure the simplicity and reader’s understanding of expression, but also highlight the intention of the spread effect of folk culture.

4. Conclusions

From the perspective of cultural presupposition, this paper explores the different ways of folk culture translation in the four English versions of *Biancheng*, including the festival, architecture, marriage and love, musical instrument and religion folk culture of Miao nationality in western Hunan. After a comparative analysis of the translations of these translators, it is found that Jeffrey C. Kinkley can grasp the connotation of the folk culture of the source language more correctly, and can deeply understand the confusion of the target language readers when they receive such information, what’s more, a plenty of compensatory methods are adopted in the translation to achieve the effect of cultural presupposition equivalence; Gladys Yang’s translation pays more attention to the Chinese characteristics of the original text, and is as faithful to the original as possible, while in some places, there are not too many explanations and some omissions also exist, which may cause the confusion and misunderstanding for the target readers due to the lack of cultural presupposition. Emily Hahn and Shing Mo-Lei, Ching Ti and Robert Payne need to have a thorough understanding of the cultural presupposition implied in the original text, and supplement the target readers with enough cultural presupposition, so as to decrease the difficulties in understanding for the target readers.

Based on the years when translators published the English versions of *Biancheng* and their popularity, it can be concluded that the importance of cultural

presupposition in translation is gradually increasing with the passage of time. Fully considering the differences between the cultural presuppositions of the readers of the source language and the target language will help to increase the acceptance of the translation and promote the spread of Chinese culture. This paper only makes a comparative study of the folk culture translation in the four English versions of *Biancheng* from the limited perspective of cultural presupposition, more cases need to be fully explained to make the research results more rigorous, and the translation methods of folk culture also need to be systematically summarized. In the future, there is still a long way to go for the relevant study of folk culture translation.

Conflicts of Interest

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

References

- [1] 杜学德. 中国民俗大系丛书·河北民俗[M]. 兰州: 甘肃人民出版社, 2004.
- [2] 孙乃荣, 史耕山. 文化自觉视野下的民俗文化英译研究[J]. 上海翻译, 2019(2): 67-72.
- [3] 于洁, 田霞. 关联理论观照下的民俗文化的预设凸显翻译方法探讨[J]. 外语与外语教学, 2008(5): 61-65.
- [4] 姜智慧. 从异化视角看民俗文化的传播——浙江省民俗文化翻译研究[J]. 中国科技翻译, 2010, 23(2): 48-51.
- [5] Nida, E. and Reyburn, W. (1981) *Meaning across Cultures*. Orbis Books, New York.
- [6] Fawcett, P. (2001) *Presupposition and Translation*. In: Hickey, L., Ed., *The Pragmatics of Translation*, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, Shanghai, 114-123.
- [7] 黄华新, 胡龙彪. 逻辑学教程[M]. 杭州: 浙江大学出版社, 2000.
- [8] 王建荣, 郭海云, 孙倩. 文化预设视角下的文物英译策略研究[J]. 东岳论丛, 2010, 31(6): 183-186.
- [9] 彭发胜, 万颖婷. 基于语料库的“边城”三个英译本文体特色分析[J]. 合肥工业大学学报, 2014(6): 83-89.
- [10] 沈从文. 边城[M]. 南京: 江苏人民出版社, 2014.
- [11] Hahn, E. and Shing, M.L. (tr.) (1936) *Green Jade and Green Jade*. *T'ien Hsia Monthly*, 2.
- [12] Ching, T. and Payne, R. (tr.) (1947) *The Frontier City*. In: Ching, T. and Payne, R., Ed., *The Chinese Earth*, George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., London, 190-289.
- [13] Yang, G. (tr.) (1981) *The Border Town and Other Stories*. Chinese Literature Press, Beijing.
- [14] Kinkley, J.C. (tr.) (2009) *Border Town: A Novel*. Harper Collions, New York.
- [15] 何自然. 语用学概论[M]. 长沙: 湖南教育出版社, 1987.
- [16] 杨汉瑜. “边城”的苗族民俗记忆与生命意识[J]. 贵州民族研究, 2013, 34(2): 85-88.
- [17] 陈琼, 黄海德. 湘西苗族地区传统宗教变迁考察与反思[J]. 民族论坛, 2016(12): 89-92.
- [18] 陆群. 湘西原始宗教艺术研究[M]. 北京: 民族出版社, 2012.