Translation Criticism of Yang Xianyi's Translation of The New Year Sacrifice from the Perspective of Culture

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Abstract

The New Year Sacrifice is a representative novel written by Lu Xun. Many translators have translated The New Year Sacrifice in different versions. Among them, the version of Yang Xianyi, a famous Chinese translator, has been widely circulated both at home and abroad, playing a positive role in promoting the spread of Lu Xun's literary works and political ideologies. Thus, the translation is worthy for scholarly research. In his translation, Yang Xianyi cleverly uses translation strategies and methods suitable for the plots of different parts in the novel, which not only restores the writing style of the original text, but also brings readers a smooth and immersive reading experience. The paper will infer the advantages or disadvantages of Yang Xianyi's translation by analysing the similarities and differences between Lu Xun's views on translation and that of Yang Xianyi. The paper will also evaluate the practical significance of Yang Xianyi's translation version from the cultural perspective.

Keywords

Translation Criticism, The New Year Sacrifice, Yang Xianyi

1. Introduction

Mao Zedong once commented “The direction of Lu Xun is the new culture direction of China.” (Sheng & Xie, 2022). The sentence reflects Lu Xun’s position in the literary world and even in the modern ideological and cultural system of China. In addition to literary creation, Lu Xun is also an excellent translator and literary critic who owns unique views on aesthetics and political situation. Therefore, scholars can recognize modern Chinese society by making research of Lu Xun and his works.

There are many people who are engaged in the research of Lu Xun all over the world, among which are represented by William A. Lyell, a famous American translator and Julia Lovell, a British sinologist. Both have systematically researched and translated Lu Xun's works. And in China, Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang are the main representatives. Although their research is not solely aimed at Lu Xun and his work, they also translated many of prose, novels, and essays of him. Yang Xianyi’s translation version of The New Year Sacrifice is also the most well-known one in China.

Yang Xianyi first started the translation of The New Year Sacrifice in the 1950s. From 1956 to 1972, the translation of Selected Works of Lu Xun, including the most popular translation of the novel, has been revised several times. There are two reasons why Yang's translation of it was chosen for the translation criticism. First, it is because the difficulties confronted by Yang Xianyi as a native Chinese speaker in translating have certain commonalities with that encountered by a lot of translators. Therefore, strategies and methods for solving these dilemmas in Yang's translation has reference values for other translators and scholars. Although the two versions of Julia Lovell and William Lyell have advantages...
in terms of the target language, their comprehension of Chinese is insufficient compared with translators of China. In this regard, the shortcomings and advantages of foreign translators’ versions have no direct reference for Chinese translators.

The following will briefly evaluate the pros and cons of Yang Xianyi's translation version of *The New Year Sacrifice* through an analysis of his translation views.

2. Similarities and Differences between Lu Xun and Yang Xianyi's Translation Thought

Lu Xun, who abandoned medicine for literature in his early years, always regarded national liberation and social transformation as his social responsibility. Therefore, neither literary creation nor the evolution of his translation views is inseparable from the two themes, politics and revolution.

In short, the evolution of Lu Xun's translation views can be divided into three stages with a general trend that is to shift from free translation to literal translation. His translation activities began in 1903, which was also the early stage of his translation views. During this stage, the themes of Lu Xun's translations which were completed in cooperation with others were mainly political novels and science fiction. Lu Xun adopted the method of free translation mainly due to the influence of views and operation modes of Lin Shu and Yan Fu, who are both famous translators of early modern China. In addition, the translation strategy he adopted during this period was free translation which refers to the modification of a part of the original work to make it conform to the culture and traditional thinking routines of Chinese readers. Since 1909, his translation view was changed by his emergence of diversified open mind. During this period, Lu Xun's translation works were not limited to only one language but expanded various types of languages and themes. The language characteristics still maintain the simplicity of the previous period especially in Lu Xun's translation of Japanese literature. However, in terms of translation strategy, he began to use foreignization gradually. From 1927 to 1936, the system of his translation view was fully mature. At this time, Lu Xun’s translations mainly included Soviet literature and more typical Soviet revolutionary literary and artistic works which were completed under the guidance of the translation strategy of foreignization and literal translation method. It means that even if there was no direct corresponding expression in Chinese, he would use methods such as transliteration and annotation to complete the foreign words in works.

Although Lu Xun's translation views and strategies had undergone a certain transformation, his purpose to change the temperament of readers and improve their intellectual level was very clear (Wang, 2017). Therefore, Lu Xun adopted the method of literal translation to restore the expression of certain concepts in the source language as much as possible, to introduce foreign literary ideas and literary policies to Chinese (Gan & Luo, 2019). The use of foreignization translation strategy has made Lu Xun criticized. However, under the special background of the New Culture Movement, his translation played a role in enlightening wisdom and making improving society indeed. Moreover, he introduced excellent foreign literary and artistic works, which were beneficial to the prosperity and innovation of Chinese literature.

Translation is another form of writing. Literary writing of Lu Xun is also inseparable from his translation activities. Therefore, it can be speculated that his literary creation could lead Chinese readers having a qualitative breakthrough in the way of thinking and the perspective of solving problems and his works could supply a chance for foreign readers to create a full understand of the society.

So far, the writer needs to mention translation views of Yang Xianyi. In general, from the cross-cultural perspective, both translators own common ideas. Before translating *The New Year Sacrifice*, Yang Xianyi has completed the translation of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, which is also one of the most widely known versions of the novel. However, he rarely discussed his translation views. The author can only obtain information from some essays and make a summary of his translation views. Yang Xianyi once believed that our people should know the cultural heritage of foreign countries, foreign countries should also know how rich China's cultural heritage is (Ren, 1993). Guided by such translation view, foreignization is often the Yang's translation strategy for the foreign translation of Chinese literary classics. In other words, his translation always strives to preserve the meaning or cultural connotation of Chinese language expression based on "expressiveness".

To sum up, both Yang Xianyi and Lu Xun attached importance to cultural communication and hoped to contribute to the cultural communication between China and foreign countries by translating. Under the context of the New Culture Movement, the dissemination of political views was also the top priority in Lu Xun’s translation activities. However, Yang Xianyi is a pure scholar without political purpose. The diversity in emphasis is the difference between the two's translation views.

3. Analysis of Difficulties in the Translation of *The New Year Sacrifice*

The simple evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of Yang's translation of *The New Year Sacrifice* must be based on a comprehensive knowledge and realization of the content and language features of the source text. As a
compulsory article in Chinese textbook, the content of the novel, which tells the tragic life of a maidservant called Hsiang Lin’s Wife, is also well known. Hsiang Lin’s Wife is not her real name, but what everyone called her in this way after she took her husband's surname. She was originally a child bride-in-law. After her husband died young, she was betrayed by her cruel mother-in-law and was forced to flee to the house of Mr. Lu. But her escape was discovered by her mother-in-law, who kidnapped her back to marry someone else. Later, her son Ah Mao was also killed by wolves. Thus, she had to return to Luchen again and begged Mr. Lu for shelter in desperation. However, the residents of the town discriminated against her by gossip and cynicism with her heart tortured and troubled. In the end, she could only beg along the street in the sound of firecrackers during The New Year Festival and died tragically. This story is a typical example of a critique and satire for the life-destroying feudal code of ethics in modern China. However, to make the translation also appear literary effects and give people inspiration, the translator needs to be seriously considered from many aspects to achieve the same effect of the original text.

The following will discuss some typical difficulties which will be confronted with in the translation of *The New Year Sacrifice*.

### 3.1 Culture-loaded Words

In the novel, one of the characteristics of the original story writing is the large number of culturally loaded words. Culture-loaded word refers to Chinese words with profound national cultural connotations that make it unique to the nation, and Western cultures cannot be completely equivalent (Wang, 2018).

The main reason for the great number of culture-loaded words in the novel is the combination of real experiences of novel authors and fictional adaptations. The writer will explain in detail next. First, Lu Xun's hometown is Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, China. At the beginning of the story, it is written that "It was such a night that I returned to Luchen, my native place" (Yang, 2002, p. 163). From this, it can be inferred that the story happened in Lu Xun's hometown, Shaoxing. When it comes to Zhejiang Province, the scenery of the area is characterized by bridges stride overflowing streams and green tiles. Therefore, there must be many things with the local flavor of Zhejiang Province in the story of *The New Year Sacrifice*. For example, when describing the cuisine of Shaoxing, the culturally loaded word "shark’s fins" appears in the novel. Secondly, because the story involves the destruction of a maidservant by feudal ethics, there must be a lot of culture-loaded words about the daily life of the old society before 1949. For example, the title of the novel *The New Year Sacrifice* is a typical culturally loaded word, which refers to a traditional custom of sacrifices to the ancestors appearing in the story. Another example is the items related to New Year’s Sacrifice, such as "incense an candles".

Among them, there are some words that can find the exact corresponding expression in English. However, due to the huge differences in cultural customs, there are still many culture-loaded words, such as "bridal chair", "perform the ceremony", etc., which cannot be completely equivalent to English words. Therefore, how to deal with the considerable number of culture-loaded words in *The New Year Sacrifice* is the first difficulty while translating.

### 3.2 Restoration of the Original Writing Style

As a master craftsman, Lu Xun has his own style of literary creation. One of the criteria of literary translation is whether it can present the literary style of the original author to the greatest extent in the translation. Through this, the strengths and weaknesses of the translation can also be judged. What is the style of Lu Xun's literary works?

In terms of sentence patterns, Lu Xun commonly uses many short sentences which are not long but can mention some clues with the previous content. For example, when the author’s aunt was looking for Hsiang Lin’s Wife, there was such a sentence: "My aunt first to the kitchen, then to the hall, then to the bedroom; but not a trace of it was to be seen anywhere." (Yang, 2003, p. 165).

This sentence describes a series of actions of the author’s aunt, but the title does not appear repeatedly in the short sentences that follow. Instead, the author chooses a neat arrangement of verbs and objects, to reflect movements in a hurry of my aunts. Another example is when describing the scene when the residents of Luchen are preparing for the sacrifice when The New Year is approaching, "They kill chickens and geese and buy pork, scouring scrubbing until all the women’s arms turn red in the water." (Yang, 2003, p. 164). The short sentences all focus on verbs and there are no subjects in the original text. Since it is from the same paragraph, the author hinted at the beginning of the paragraph that it is the sacrifice of the residents in Luchen, so the subject here is naturally the people of the town. The sentence in the original text beginning with a series of verbs shows that the activities of sacrifice appear well-organized, in which there is no room for error as the most solemn ceremony of the year.

Such a writing style will bring readers two experiences. The first is that when reading, the content is very dense and there are many clues and information, which need to be quickly integrated in a short period of time. Short sentences
determine that the original author did not provide readers with the opportunity to receive information gradually, but instead gave the information to readers rapidly. In this way, they can leave their own ideological space to interpret the content of the novel. Readers will interpret the works independently. In the process, they will also receive information and think deeply at the same time. So that the depressing atmosphere of the novel will be subtly passed on to them. The solemn and gloomy style of most of Lu Xun's works is formed in this way. At the same time, because Lu Xun is very particular about the choice of words, even if there are not a great number of words in one sentence, he can give readers complete and concrete information. For example, it is written in the novel that "only an occasional flicker of her eyes showed she was still a living creature" (Yang, 2003, p. 178). The sentence describes the exhaustion and weakness of Hsiang Lin’s Wife before her death. Similar writing cases abound in the novel.

From this analysis, we can draw the following conclusion: how to keep the writing style of short sentences to reflect the atmosphere of the original story in the translation is also a test for the translator.

3.3 The Theme of The Novel

If readers are familiar with Lu Xun's works, the theme of novel need not be emphasized again. A major feature of his works is to criticize and expose the destruction of the old society to people through the narrative to enlighten people's wisdom and innovate the way of logical thinking, which has been mentioned in the previous article. As for The New Year Sacrifice, it was not written with straightforward language to directly tell readers the social issues that the author wanted to reflect on, however, through many details, readers can experience the theme for themselves. For example, in the elements about why Hsiang Lin’s Wife was killed, the cynicism of the residents of Lu Chen to her is one of the key points. The emotion of residents in Luchen towards her are progressive. From the beginning, they were very sympathetic when they heard that her son was killed by wolves, and then residents became impatient when Hsiang Lin's Wife described her tragic experience again and again. Obviously, residents' emotional shift towards Hsiang Lin’s Wife was reflected in the conversion of their tone and attitude. For Chinese readers, even a change of one word can reflect the difference. But for foreign readers, it is very difficult to achieve based on differences of languages. Therefore, how to reveal the profound social problem of feudal ethics destroying human nature through the details of the translation is the third difficulty in the novel translation work.

4. A Brief Comment on the Translation of Yang Xianyi

When coming to Yang Xianyi's translation of A Dream of Red Mansions, the conclusion of his translation strategy in community of scholars is that foreignization is the main and domestication is the supplement. Yang Xianyi himself also believes that the translator should exercise restraint when translating, and his responsibility is to transmit the original text information to the target language readers as faithfully as possible (Ouyang, 2014). The analysis of Yang’s translation of The New Year Sacrifice should also be based on the premise. The difficulties while translating have been mentioned above, so the evaluation of Yang's translation should also start from these angles.

4.1 The Translation of Culture-loaded Words

4.1.1 Words with No Equivalent in English Vocabulary

As mentioned above, many of the culture-loaded words have no equivalent in English. There are a lot of such words in The New Year Sacrifice, which are concentrated in paragraphs about the remarriage of Hsiang Lin’s Wife. Now the writer will take this part as an example to analyze. The author first uses the third-person narrative in this part, and then transitions to the remarriage of Hsiang Lin’s Wife with more details. Many culture-loaded words related to Chinese wedding ceremonies appear in the narrative. Yang's version basically adopts the translation method of literal translation, directly expressing the literal meaning of the word in English without further explanation.

Example 1:

Target Translation: the bridal head-dress, perform the ceremony in the hall, wedding candlesticks

The above three words are all commonly used culture-loaded words in the context of Chinese wedding ceremonies. When translating these words, Yang chose to directly use words which basically correspond to Chinese meanings in English for translation. Although the method he used is literal translation, it also explains the meaning of words while translating the original text. Taking "wedding candlesticks" as an example, the word can be defined as the candle to be lit in the wedding room when the bride and groom get married. The translation into "wedding candlesticks" introduces the name of the thing and explains its function. The advantage of the translation is that readers can understand the meaning without commenting and bringing readers a smooth reading experience.

Example 2:

Target Translation: It was really a bolt from the blue. Her husband was so strong, nobody could have guessed that a
young fellow like that would die of typhoid fever.
"A bolt from the blue" mentioned in this sentence is one of the common colloquialisms in Chinese, which refers to a thing that is not expected or imagined by people. In the context of this sentence, the colloquialism means that when the residents of Luchen were discussing Hsiang Lin's Wife, the fact that her husband died of typhoid fever was different from the residents' expectations. It is full of disdain and contempt for her, and it also reflects the indifference and ruthlessness of the residents of Luchen in the novel. Therefore, the meaning of this common saying needs to be completely preserved and cannot be handled by the translation method of free translation, because using this method will change the meaning of the original text. However, there is no fully corresponding expression in English that can achieve literal translation. Yang Xianyi used a similar idiom in English to translate the colloquialism in the Chinese. The translation does not change the writing idea of using the colloquial in the original text, and retains the meaning that the original text wants to express. Foreign readers can stay fluent and can fully understand the meaning of the original text.

4.1.2 Idiomatic Expressions in Chinese

Lu Xun used a lot of colloquial expressions that are useful in Chinese, which made the articles read with a sense of presence and reality. Readers can also have a real emotional experience when reading, so that they can empathize with characters in the story. However, such expressions often do not have completely corresponding vocabulary in English and the translator needs to do further processing. For this type of vocabulary, Yang's translation which conforms to the method of foreignization as the main and naturalization second is more flexible.

Example 3:
Target Translation: …there was a great deal to be done at the beginning of spring, and since there were only old people and children at home they were short-handed.

"Short-handed" in Chinese is a typical colloquial expression, referring to the fact that laborers cannot meet the current labor force required. Yang's translation selects the adjective "short-handed" and combines it with the previous short clause, so that the scattered information in original text is recombined, which not only expresses the information but also makes the translation more concise.

Example 4:
Target Translation: …such people may seem very pitiful they exert a bad moral influence.

The expression "bad moral influence" is also a common four-character word that often appears in Chinese. What exactly do the four Chinese words mean? In fact, it is not difficult to know the scene in which the expressions are used. These four words are the most naked criticism of a person's moral corruption. Therefore, these words imply the moral level of an individual or group. However, the word in Chinese does not refer to the harm brought to the subject, but refers to the bad influence it has on the people around. Therefore, Yang’s translation is very appropriate for it. He completely adopted the method of literal translation, but he has made a good dismantling of the connotative meaning of it. The translation can let foreign readers understand that people are mainly judging Hsiang Lin’s Wife from a moral point of view and are dissatisfied with her personal behavior.

4.2 The Restoration of Lu Xun's writing style in Yang's translation

As mentioned above, Lu Xun's unique writing style is to convey dense information to readers by using short sentences, so that the language characteristics of depression can be understood by readers. At the same time, most of his works illustrate and satirize social phenomena. So how does Yang's translation version show the special creative style?

In the translation of The New Year Sacrifice, Yang mainly used two strategies for short sentences. The first is to deal with it according to the habits of native speaker of English, which is also in line with foreign readers' habits. The second is to translate according to the sentence structure of original text, without any changes, in other words, using literal translation. In the following, examples of these two strategies will be analyzed separately.

Example 4:
Target Translation: …her hair, which had been streaked with white five years before, was now completely white, quite unlike someone in her forties. Her face was fearfully thin and dark in its sallowness, and had moreover lost its former expression of sadness, looking as if carved out of wood. Only an occasional flicker of her eyes showed she was still a living creature.

This paragraph is a description of Hsiang Lin’s Wife’s appearance when the protagonist met her for the first time. These short sentences in original text do not start with a subject, but each conveys a piece of information. For Chinese readers, it is easy to understand that this part is describing the appearance of Hsiang Lin’s Wife. The reading experience of original text is based on short sentences with very vivid information. The shorter the text is, the more emotional impact is. But for foreign readers, if they read literal translation according to the short sentence structure of original text,
they will feel that the information has no logical basis, and there is a lack of correlation. Therefore, Yang chose to combine short sentences about the description of characters and then form long sentences to supplement the absent logical correlative words in Chinese. For example, the translator divided the paragraph into three long sentences based on each semicolon in the original text. And he also used participles and clauses flexibly, so that the information to make the description of the characters lifelike has a certain primary and secondary distribution. Although there are certain differences from original incisive writing style, such a translation conforms to the reading habits of foreign readers, which makes the characters in the story are more easily accepted.

Example 5:
Target Translation: Finally, however, I ended by laughing at myself, thinking that such a chance meeting could have no great significance, and yet I was taking it so to heart; no wonder certain educationalists called me a neurotic.

The scene corresponding to this part of the story is that Hsiang Lin’s Wife asks me whether hell really exists and whether the family can meet again after death. Such a question is a very difficult one for "me" who does not believe in ghosts and gods and is not superstitious at all. The protagonist can only say "I am not sure" (Yang, 2003, p. 170) to her with asking himself while putting off her. The above example involving the ideas of "me" in the story. After Hsiang Lin’s Wife left Lu Town, the protagonist deeply realized that he could not help her, so he felt very uneasy. Under such unease, he also tried to persuade himself to say so, and no one would pay attention to it.

Therefore, the author used several consecutive short sentences in the original text, so that readers can also experience the state of the protagonist trying to convince himself by talking to himself. Yang's translation does not merge or adjust the order of consecutive short sentences, but adopts a literal translation method, preserving the logical imprecision in English. The translator completely restores the psychological activities of the protagonist in original text to the translation, which is a very expressive treatment.

Example 6:
Target Translation: And sure enough when they went further in there he was, lying in the wolf's lair, with all his entrails eaten away, his hand still tightly clutching that little basket.

Hsiang Lin’s Wife told the residents of Luchen about the scene when her son died. Yang Xianyi used the method of literal translation to restore the content of speech of Hsiang Lin’s Wife in the original text. Because she is from the countryside, her words are very colloquial. It was written in the original text that she cried very sadly every time she talked about the death of her son, so each clause in the translation was not very long, because when choked up, what people said was often intermittent. Foreign readers can also experience emotions of Hsiang Lin’s Wife through Yang Xianyi's translation.

Yang's translation of The New Year Sacrifice is a perfect presentation of the original text of course. However, because of literal translation, which has its limitations, Yang's translation version is not perfect. Considering the huge differences between Chinese and English in many aspects, these shortcomings do not affect the final effect of Yang's translation on the original text.

5. Conclusion

Both Lu Xun and Yang Xianyi believed that language should be a tool for cultural exchange. If there is no translator to translate the literary works of different languages, then neither country can have a voice in the process of cultural exchange. In global integration process, China has truly stepped onto the international stage to gain more power of discourse. In the context, Chinese culture has gradually become the mainstream of the world. Yang's translation of The New Year Sacrifice does not deliberately modify the original text to cater to the need of readers and retains the main theme that the author wanted to convey. Under the dual context of the increasingly close international cultural communication and the refreshing status of Chinese culture, the use of such translation strategies is worthy of affirmation. Only when one has absolute cultural confidence in his own culture can he transmit the culture to foreigners through translation and completely retain the content of culture-loaded words and sentences. This strategy with an international perspective is worth learning for other translators. At the same time, Yang's translation of The New Year Sacrifice is also a good representation for learning how to translate Chinese to English. The translation methods and strategies used in it are worthy for translation learners learning and analyzing.

References