What gets lost in translation:
Language and culture in “Hongloumeng”

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This paper deals with the problem of what is lost during a translation process. “Hongloumeng”, one of the four great classic novels in China, is chosen as the source for this research. Three aspects are selected for closer analysis: the book title, the naming system of characters, and some of the poems in the novel. Two different translations of the book are used for comparison: The Dream of Red Mansions by Yang (1999), and The Story of the Stone by Hawkes (1973). Cultural values and social norms are significant when doing translations because culture and language are interlinked. The loss of meaning through translation from Chinese to English seems to be unavoidable due to the fundamental differences of the naming systems and writing systems in the two languages. However, this loss can be reduced by certain level by adopting various translation skills and tactics.

1. Introduction

“Hongloumeng” 《紅樓夢》 is considered as one of the four great classical novels of Chinese Literature, and appeared as a complete version in 120 chapters. The first edition of this classic novel was printed in 1792, edited by Gao E and Cheng Weiyuan.
The edition published nowadays is an incomplete version by Cao Xueqin in eighty chapters with a supplement of forty chapters by an anonymous author. Since the first publication of this novel, scholars have attempted to translate it into other languages such as English. There are only two completely translated versions which can be commonly found nowadays: The Story of the Stone by David Hawkes, and The Dream of Red Mansions by Gladys Yang and Yang Hsien-yi. The difficulties of the translation work are not only due to the length of the novel, but also cultural factors, and the marvelous writing style of the author. Translation is a complex progress which includes the de-coding of the source language (SL) and the re-coding in the target language (TL). During the de-coding and re-coding process, translation loss is unavoidable. The translator is the one who is bearing the responsibility of the loss, as he/she is the medium between the author and the target language readers. Since there are differences between the source language and the target language with respect to the language system and the cultural background, translation loss seems to be inevitable during the translation process. However, there are still various strategies and approaches which can be adopted by the translator in order to reduce the level of translation loss.

Since the title represents the theme of the whole book and is the first impression the reader has of it, I will first examine the differences between the original title “Hongloumeng” on the one hand, and “the Story of the Stone” and “The Dream of Red Mansions” on the other. Then I will discuss the differences in the colour term “RED” between the source culture and the target culture. This discussion is followed by the comparison of the naming of the characters and some poems in the novel. I will try to illustrate the loss of translation with regard to the relation of language and culture, as translation loss inevitably leads to a loss of culture in the translated text.

2. Summary of “Hongloumeng”

The novel begins as the story-telling of the Stone, endowed with the longing of enlightenment and the mortal world. The Stone is inextricably bound with the fate of a small flower, which later transforms into a girl, Lin Daoyu, with the ultimate desire of repaying the stone, Jia Baoyu, with “a debt of tears”.

The mortal world is an allegory for the contemporary China of Cao Xueqin's times. The author intended to reveal the dark side of the contemporary society: the
corruption of the officers, the usurpation of power for personal motives, the hopelessness and helplessness of the ill-fated. The whole story is about the Jia family, who was once in the favour of the Emperor and in high status. “Baoyu” (寶玉) is born in the Jia family with a jade in his mouth, which is a symbol of being the incarnation of the Stone. However, the current generation can no longer live up to the high standards of their ancestors, and there is even an air of decay about it. He is born with a jade in his mouth which is a sign of blessing and talent in the eyes of the Jia family. Thus Baoyu becomes the hope of the Jia family, as he is the most outstanding young person among his generation. Nonetheless, he does not like to follow the old conventions and has fun with the girls in his place, Yi Hong Yuen. All in all, his behavior does not meet the expectations of his family. Lin Dai-yu (林黛玉), the incarnation of the small flower, is a relative of the Jia family. The author arranged Daiyu and Xue Baochai (薛寶釵) to come into the Jia family and live with them. Daiyu as the flower is born into the Lin family which is a close relative of Jia. Thus, when the Lin family has difficulties, Daiyu is sent to the Jia family for helping them. Xue’s family has found some excuses to live with Jia, as they want Baochai to get married with Baoyu. Lin and Xue are both beautiful and smart girls. The major difference between them is that Lin is more sensitive and emotional. She is presented as one of the most favorite girls because she has the most purified spirit and mind, which is due to her fore-life as a flower. Thus, her poems and writings are always the most outstanding ones throughout the book. In contrast, Xue is a more all-rounded person. She is also talented, however, she is more bound to the traditions. She encourages Baoyu to strive for success in life as regards money, power, and status. Most of the readers would even say her mind is shrewd and deep. Others said that Xue is only a young girl, thus she is not that influential in the Jia family, and she is also a victim of the traditional conventions. Even though there is some little scale of revolution held by Baochai, Tanchun (Baoyu’s third sister) and other girls, they do not succeed in changing the fate of Jia’s falling. Lin dies with a chronological illness because of her sorrow and her broken heart from her relationship with Baoyu. Xue, with the support from the Jia family, marries Baoyu on the same day of Lin’s death; Baoyu, after the marriage, decides to become a monk and to get rid of the burdens of tradition. On the surface, the whole story is just about the love affairs of Baoyu, Lin and Xue, yet at a deeper level it describes the corruption of the rich and the revolution against tradition. Baoyu, Lin and some other characters fight against tradition, while Xue and others in the Jia family fall victims to the old system.
3. Translation loss

3.1 Hong Luo Meng

The title has an influence on what potential readers expect from a book, and how they perceive it. For instance, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll evokes that the main character is a girl and her name is Alice. The reader of this title would expect that she must experience some sort of excitement and exotic experience, implied by the word “adventures”. People may need some more clues about the theme of the book, but from the word “Wonderland” they would expect fantasy and imagination. Thus, the title plays a really important role in a book.

Considering the title of the book in question here, “Hongloumeng”, already raises a cultural problem. Literally, “Hong” means “red (colour)”, “Lou” means “houses or buildings”, and “Meng” means “dreams”. In the context of Chinese ancient society, “Honglou” does not simply stand for “buildings or houses of red”. It has a connotative meaning, which Hawkes has suggested in his preface of the translation. “Honglou” is a sign of opulence and grandeur. In the past, only the palaces and temples were built with red bricks, while the poor places were built in gray. The term “Honglou” was then interpreted by the original readers as “the residence of girls from wealthy family”. However, for the target readers, it is not the same case of with the “RED mansions” which has no connotation of “girls from wealthy family”. Thus, Hawkes chose the other suggested title from the novel “the Story of the Stone”, instead of doing the translation of the colour red. On the other hand, Yang preserved “Hongloumeng” by translating it as “The Dream of Red Mansions”.

By using another title, Hawkes’ approach avoids producing wrong images on the side of the target readers. Apparently, the title can also provide the information that the book is all about the story of a stone, Baoyu. However, the target readers do not only miss the opportunity to understand the cultural background of the ancient Chinese but also the connotation of the colour “RED” in the Chinese culture. In contrast, Yang’s version takes the risk of misinterpretation by keeping the “red mansions”. I believe readers would have a deeper understanding of the “red mansions” after having read the book. It is easy to link the “red mansion” to the house of the Jia Family, a luxurious and over-decorated house.
According to Nida (1969), translation is a process of reproducing the message, and reaching equivalence is more important than being identical. He believes that language and culture are correlated with each other and that different cultures develop different languages. Nida (2001) has also stated that, language provides information about the processes and the values of a culture. This can be applied to the cultural differences of the colour “RED” and “GREEN”. The compound noun “Honglou” has indeed a connotative meaning besides “buildings in red”. The extended meaning of this compound noun can be traced back to the ancient Chinese culture. Different social environments mold people with different perceptions of the world. When comparing typical architecture of China and the West it becomes apparent that the materials used and the building styles are quite different. “Honglou” expresses a kind of wealth and grandness to Chinese people, whereas “Red Mansions” might not.

“Hong” symbolizes “happiness”, “joy”, and “beauty” in the Chinese culture. This colour is being adopted for different festivals and occasions in China, for example, at Chinese New Year, there are “red pockets”, “red lanterns”, “red firecrackers”, “red couplets”; at weddings there are “red bride wedding dress”, “red bed sheets”; on birthdays we have “red boiled eggs” and so on. On the contrary, “GREEN” in Chinese implies some inferior meanings; for example, “wearing a green hat” is a saying for a man, especially a husband, whose wife has an affair with somebody else.

“RED” appears in high frequency throughout the whole book. “Yi Hong Yuan” is the place where Baoyu lives. The primary meaning of “Yi” is happiness, and of “Yuan” court. Baoyu is named “Yi Hong Gong Zi” subsequent to his moving. “Gong Zi” is a form of address for a young male. In the story, “RED” does not solely mean ‘red in colour’. The name of Baoyu expresses the thought and goal of his life, which are opposing to the old traditions. The use of “RED” of the description of Baoyu actually strengthens the characteristics of him. When “yi” and “hong” go together, this term also means guarding and taking care of the girls, as “hong” (RED) means “girls from wealthy family” as stated above. In his mind, girls are much better than boys, they are fragile and in need of protection.

Hawkes has changed “RED” to “GREEN”. “Yi Hong Yuan” has become “House of Green Delight”, and “Yi Hong Gong Zi” “the Green Boy”. These translations cannot provide the hidden meaning of the author that Baoyu is the one in the Jia Family who is the guardian of the girls. At the same time, the translated version does no longer transfer the connotative meaning of “RED” into the western culture. Again, Yang has taken an opposite approach. He translated “Yi Hong Yuan” as “the Happy Red Court”,

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and “Yi Hong Gong Zi” as “the Happy Red Prince”. Even though the translated version is not as explicit as the source text, it still keeps the original meanings of “RED”.

This discussion shows that the name of a book may express key aspects of its content, and that the names of the characters may also play an important role in presenting their personalities, and in fore-telling their fate.

3.2 Naming of the characters

In the story, there are 400 characters, with over 80 surnames. Cao was a master of describing characters, and nearly every character is presented in a vivid way, and with his/her own special personality. Most of the names of the characters have a specific meaning either in a homonymic or polysemic way. This practice not only enhances their personalities, but also foretells their fate and their denouement. Readers may get a deeper understanding of the characters simply by looking at their names. One of the differences between Chinese and English is the writing system. In Chinese the “character” zi (字) is the smallest unit in written form, with a unique form and corresponding pronunciation of every character. Most words are the combination of sound and meaning; however, there are some exceptions. These examples below are all about “characters” with a fixed form and a certain meaning. Thus, I suggest using ‘word’ in the sense of ‘character(zi)’ in this essay to reduce confusion. Homophony allows for wordplay, and making the names homophones, the author of “Hongloumeng” gave them another hidden meaning. In the following examples, the pronunciation of the names will be presented in the Chinese “Pinyin” system for the homonymic Chinese words.

3.2.1 Transliteration

The story of the Stone is recounted by people who are called Zhen Shi Yin (甄士隱), and Jia Yu Cun (賈雨村). The author constructed the story in an alternation of reality and illusion, and this intention is disclosed by the names of the story-tellers. First, “甄士隱” is the written form of the name in Chinese, with the Pinyin as “Zhen Shi Yin”. This pronunciation can also mean “hiding the truth”. (真·事·隱). “真” (Zhen) means “true or real”, “事” (Shi) “events or things”, and “隱” (Yin) “hiding”. Thus, as a whole,
it means “hiding away the reality or the truth”. Second, “賈雨村” with the Pinyin as “Jia · Yu · Cun” can also mean “the existence of false speech or lies”. “假” (Jia) means “false or unreal”, “語” (Yu) “speech or say”, and “存” (Cun) “existence”.

Given the use of homophony, the loss of meaning in translation seems to be unavoidable. First, for Chinese readers, “甄” and “賈” are clearly surnames; furthermore, they share the meaning of “true” and “false” respectively, as “真” zhen and “假” jia are their homophones of “甄” zhen and “賈” jia. These tricks played by the author cannot be translated into the target language, thus the target language readers cannot understand the story in the same way as the readers of the original. Translators can translate the names above as, for example, “Truth Hiding” or “Telling Lie”. However, once the names are given such meaning, they violate the norm of giving names in the target culture, but not in the source culture. As mentioned above, the author has adopted the homonym of the underlying meaning of true and false, and the words “甄” zhen and “賈” jia are proper surnames which can be commonly seen in China. Thus, it does not sound strange to Chinese readers. As a result, the translator adopted the method of transliteration, translating the above names phonetically. It is a very direct way of doing translation, however, it comes with the loss of the meaning as regards naming.

3.2.2 Functional Translation

The four sisters of Baoyu of the Jia family are named as follows: Yu Chun, Ying Chun, Tan Chun, and Xin Chun. They are born with an ill-fated destiny, due to the decay and corruption of the Jia family, as well as with their destiny of being females. “Yu · Ying · Tan · Xin” is written as “元 · 迎 · 探 · 惜”; however, it can be also interpreted as “原 · 應 · 歎 · 息”, which means “it is supposed to sigh with regret”.

Hundreds of maids work for the Jia family, and some of them are of a higher status than the others. For instance, HuaXiRen (花襲人) is literally translated as “Aroma”, Qingwen (晴雯) as “Skybright”, and XiangLing (香菱) as “Caltrop”. Taking readability into consideration, Hawkes only translated some of the name of these maids literally, and others phonetically. In the latter cases, the meaning of the name is lost during the translation process, along with the intention of the author.

Translators have to be selective, they need to choose between the readability of the target source and the original practice applied in the source text. Although translation loss is thus not avoidable, translators can still make a difference between a good and a
bad translation. Hawkes performed the translation in a thoughtful way, for instance, “Skybright”, the name of the maid Qingwen, appears within the lines of the poem describing the maid, while “Aroma” helps people associate the poem with the maid described. This use of the names will be explained in more detail in the following section on poetry.

4. Poetry

Poetry plays a significant role in the novel, and there are over 180 poems and songs in it. These poems include the following functions, among others: aesthetic construction, intensification of the theme of the novel, implications of characters’ personalities, foretelling the denouement. In chapter five, the author already foreshadows the destiny of the main characters such as Daiyu and Baochai in the form of a poem, the “Jinling, Twelve Beauties of Register”. The Twelve Beauties are the twelve beloved girls of the author in the book. Poems on the whole are nicely constructed, including those concerning the “Jinling, Twelve Beauties”, with at least 15 different types of figures of speech being adopted, for instance, pun, couplet, synecdoche, hyperbole, chiasmus, homophony and so on (Chen, 2004). Each poem represents one character in the novel. However, this representation has to be figured out by the readers themselves. There are clues in between the verses of poems, so readers can guess the corresponding girl to the poem.

Here are some examples of the use of homonomy in the first poem from the Main Register, concerning Lin and Xue:

Verse 1 – 玉 • 綢 • 林 • 中 • 掛 “Yu • Dai • Lin • Zhong • Guai”
Verse 2 – 金 • 簪 • 雪 • 里 • 埋 “Jin • Zan • Xue • Li • Mai”

The first three words of verse 1 are exactly the name of Lin Dai Yu, in an inverted way of presentation. In verse 2, “Xue” is the surname of Xue Baochai, who is also in love with Baoyu, a competitor of Lin Dai Yu. “金 • 簪” has a meaning similar to the first name of Xue Baochai. On account of the above clues, we can deduce that this poem describes the girls Li Dai Yu and Xue Baochai. Yang translated the poem literally as “Buried in snow the broken golden hairpin, and hanging in the wood the belts of jade”, and Hawkes did it in a similar way, as “The jade belt in the greenwood hangs, the gold pin is buried beneath the snow”. From the above two translations, target readers have
no clues as to which girls the poems are talking about. Readers may imagine the plight of the girls. However, the trickiest point of the above poem concerns the names. Since the target readers cannot understand the linking between LinDaiyu and “the belts of jade and the wood”, and of XueBaochai with “the snow and the golden hairpin”, the above poem is apparently meaningless to them. The same holds true of the other poems about different girls in chapter 5 (Cao, 1973:132-136) of the novel. Here are some more examples:

The second poem from the Supplementary Register No.2, concerning Aroma:

Verse 1 – 一．簇．鮮．花 “Yi．Cu．Xian．Hua”
Verse 2 – 一．床．破．席 “Yi．Chuang．Po．Xi”

This poem refers to the maid HuaXiRen, which can be inferred from the pronunciation of the last two words of verse 1 and verse 2, “Hua” and “Xi”. Hawkes’ translation, “Of sweetest flower the rich perfume” highlights the meaning of “fragrance or aroma”, which helps readers associate this meaning to the maid “Aroma” (HuaXiRen).

The first poem from the Supplementary Register No.2, concerning Skybright:

Verse 1 – 霽月．難逢．彩雲．易散
Verse 2 – Seldom the moon shines in a cloudless sky, and days of brightness all too soon pass by (by Hawkes)

Cao used a different figure of speech for the hidden clues. “霽月” means a clear moon after rain, which implies a clear sky (晴); “彩雲” means the colouring on the clouds, which has the same meaning as “雯”. Thus, readers can easily associate this poem with Qingwen (晴雯), “Skybright”. In verse 2, “sky” and “brightness” are used, which also help readers identify the person the poem refers to, “Skybright”.

Hawkes translated these verses thoughtfully: he did not only keep the form of the source, but also considered the intentional meaning of the author. He translated the name on the basis of its meaning but not literally; thus he managed to present the meaning of the poem in an easier way.
5. Conclusion

In this essay, I discussed the loss as well as some ways of preserving the original meaning of translation in two English translations of the Chinese novel “Hongloumeng”. I focused on three aspects: the title, the naming system of the characters, and poems. Translation is a time-consuming and thankless task, and there is no perfect translation. By adopting the mode of communication to translation, the process of translation can be viewed as doing the communication between the author and the target reader. The translator needs to understand the meaning expressed by the author, then rewrite it in another language, while translating also affects the target readers’ understanding of the book. The translator needs to have a comprehensive understanding of the original text, with regard of the meaning, the writing style and also its cultural values before he or she can translate it into the target language.

As illustrated above, loss is unavoidable during the translation process, due to the fundamental differences of English and Chinese writing systems, and the naming systems. The naming of the characters also affects how the translator translates the poems and writings, which play a significant role in this book. Consequently, the problems in translating the names also cause problems in the translation of poems. By comparing the two versions of translation by Yang and Hawkes, it can be seen that the loss can be reduced by applying different skills and methods. However, such a loss can only be reduced but not be totally prevented.

References


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