

Cross-Cultural Inter-Semiotic Adaptation of Chinese Classics in the West

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Abstract: This paper explores cross-cultural semiotics in adaptation in order to rethink the relationships between China and the West. The multi-dimensional model of cross-cultural research presented defends a temporal semiotic orientation, rather than a purely spatial approach for intercultural interpretation. The paper insists that in the age of globalization, cultural identity is unavoidably a very sharp question, and that multiple layers of meanings are involved in cultural identity. Thus, it explores differences and parallelisms between Western and Chinese semiotics, conservative and as well as unconventional approaches – misappropriation, transplantation, transfer and transformation – which appear in adaptations such as *Journey to the West* and *Wolf Totem*. Adaptations are contemplated as intercultural avenues for learning about the West and exporting Chinese culture to the world, showing the complexity of cross-cultural exchanges which are never merely one-directional and which include temporal mappings.

Keywords: Cross-cultural, Classical works; Semiotics, Dialogue, Adaptation

INTRODUCTION

Culture is understood not just as symbolic (Burke, 1941) but, rather, as “semiotic action”, in the Peircean sense of the word. That is, culture is, above all, as Clifford Geertz (1973) has pointed out), human behaviour that might take the form of phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, sound in music, texture in sculpture, form in architecture, and so on. In other words, culture signifies, and it does no matter if it is understood in cognitive terms, as a frame of mind, or in a more pragmatic sense, as patterned conduct.

Because culture is always national, but also always international and transnational, this research focuses on the study of how these “semiotic actions” transcend the specificity of a given nation, in this case, the People’s Republic of China. There are at least two ways by which the national can become international: translation and cross-cultural interpretation. Translation covers not only the conversion of language, but also cultural variations which are not just unidirectional but

multidirectional, that is, cultural intersections take place across space and time (Li and Guo, 2012: 45-60). The history and memory of a nation, its literary works, and other records in print form can be passed on and translated across space and also across time. These records can offer insights into the symbolic dimensions of the social actions of a given nation, its art, ideology, religion, laws, morality, science, technology. They function as sign-systems that contain information that can function as “templates” for the organization of the individual and the social.

As semiotics implies semantics – signs, by definition, make sense – any channel of expression in any act of communication carries meaning. For this reason, even exclusively non-verbal communication deserves the label “text”, in the wide sense of the word. A text can be defined as a combination of signs that carries a communicative intention, a definition that would accommodate phenomena like gestures, sign language (for the deaf), messages in different codes such as mathematical code, or Braille for the blind, including music and images, both fixed or moving as in film or in digital forms (such as Flash). As a result, translation can be seemed to represent a semiotic process by means of which a combination of signs is transformed into another combination signs. It can be considered monosemiotic, when it deals only with verbal content, and polysemiotic, when it uses various channels of communication. In the first case we deal with intrasemiotic processes. In the second, we deal with intersemiosis, for instance when translating from text to tactile Braille. Intersemiosis may include the same channel of expression as the source text or different channels (more or less), which might include the presence of verbal material and non-verbal elements.

The following lines offer case studies with the example of two Chinese classical works, *Journey to the West* and *Wolf Totem*. The journey of these two classical works, from its original sources to its Western and Eastern (mis)adaptations and critical interpretations, shows the complexity of cross-cultural exchanges which are never merely one-directional and which include temporal mappings too.

THE CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF *JOURNEY TO THE WEST*

As one of the four famous Chinese Classical Novels of Chinese literature, *Journey to the West* was written by Chinese Ming Dynasty novelist Wu Cheng'en (吴承恩, about 1500-1583). It is based on Tang Records on

Western Regions, folklore and Yuan Dramas. *Poetics on Monk Tang Sanzang's Pilgrimage* was the earliest records of the stories, dating from the Song Dynasty. Being one of the first example of ancient Chinese fiction, the book depicted the social reality at the time, describing a series of stories in which Sun Wukong (孙悟空), Zhu Bajie (猪八戒) and Sha Wujing (沙悟净) escorted their teacher Tang Sanzang (唐三藏) in their Pilgrimage to the West. After defeating all the devils and overcoming totally eighty-one difficulties, they arrive at the Western Paradise and obtain the Buddhist scriptures from Buddha.

Since its inception, *Journey to the West* has been widely circulated among Chinese people and adapted into sorts of media forms like local operas, movies, TV shows, cartoons, comics and numerous versions. Besides, it has been translated in various foreign languages, such as English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Esperanto, Russian, Czech, Romantic, Polish, Japanese, Korean or Vietnamese, gaining much attention in Europe and America. Taking an example, the circulation of *Journey to the West* in France can be traced back to the early 18th century. As early as 1912, the book *Selections of Chinese Literature* compiled by French scholar Morant incorporated translated sections from *Journey to the West*. Twelve years later in *Le Singe Et Le Pourceau (The Adventures of Monkey and Pig)*, Morant published a translation of over one hundred episodes from *Journey to the West*.

Following the original novel faithfully, a TV series of forty-one episodes was produced by China International Television Corporation and broadcasted in 1986. The series caused a sensation and the audience included the young or the old. This TV series is widely regarded as a classic and enjoys wide popularity even today. Up to now it is still the most popular TV series according to CCTV statistics, recognized as a classic and praised as the best and most authentic interpretation of the novel. The various forms of circulation (including translation, adaptation etc.) of *Journey to the West* has turned the classic into "World Literature".

The fantasy-comedy film *A Chinese Odyssey* was loosely adapted from *Journey to the West* by Hong Kong director Stephen Chow. The film was amusingly modernized exaggerating the classical themes in *Journey to the West* and creating a love story. Very popular after its release, the film includes postmodern techniques such as collage, parody and so on. Thus, the character of Joker (Monkey) in *A Chinese Odyssey* is caught between

history and reality, also mixing Chinese and English dialogue, as well as vulgar elegant speech. The character of Sun Wukong talks dirty, and talkative Tang Sanzang sings English songs. Full of black humor, *A Chinese Odyssey* “became a cultural totem in the late nineties, but has not lost its pioneer position” [Yunfei Yang, Net Ease Entertainment critic, 2007-06-26]. In addition, with the rapid development of science and technology, the transmission overseas of *Journey to the West* has maintained a leading position.

Based on the Chinese classic, in 2001 NBC television the in United States produced a TV series entitled *The Monkey King*. The TV series was created by the producer of *Small Ville*, with six episodes in the first season. In order to reinforce the impressive special effects, NBC invited the action director in *Mission: Impossible 2*, Cinesite, to be the action director. The theme, ideology, cultural connotation and aesthetic tendencies of the film were all loosely based on the original, presenting American values such as individualism, the pursuit of individual dignity, freedom and independence, all of which are completely different from traditional Chinese values. Thus, the story of pilgrimage of four monks who search for Buddhist scriptures shifts to a single hero who saves the world on his own. Buddhism is replaced by Christian doctrine, inner strength before temptation, forgiveness and so on. The plot thus totally changed.

Journey to the West was also popular in Japan, repeatedly adapted for film and television. Japanese TV series *The Adventures of Super Monkey* and the film with the same title were released in 2006 and 2007 respectively. The crew tried to create a blockbuster fit for all audiences and became No. one in box office in the summer of 2007, beating even *Harry Potter*. Not strictly loyal to the original, the Japanese TV series and film took part of the original plot of the expedition to the West of the four monks, boldly adapting the psychology and styles of characters. The story of Tang Sanzang’s pilgrimage was transformed into a Japanese-style entertainment dealing with dreams, adventure and friendship. Some astonishing “innovations” were introduced. For instance, Tang Sanzang becomes a pretty girl in white frock, walking with her three disciples all the way and never riding White Dragon Horse. Monkey King Sun Wukong became the third disciple, all of which were in a balanced position. The major difference between the Japanese and Chinese versions was that the four

are turned into ordinary people, and the evils and monster they fight against are persuaded but not defeated. Thus, the Japanese *Adventures of Super Monkey* differs completely from its Chinese original, devoid of cultural connotations.

More recently, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the production team of Oscar-winning *The King's Speech* have shown interest in producing a TV series entitled *The Legend of Monkey* based on the story of *Journey to the West*, to be broadcasted in ABC, TVNZ, and Netflix in 2018. The TV series consists of 10 episodes of 30 minutes. Michael Carrington, head of ABC's television show, explained that this mythical take continues to captivate global audiences and that their production partners Seesaw Films will bring a new version of *The Legend of Monkey* through incredible locations and sets. Filmed in Australia and New Zealand, the casting includes Asian actors Chai Hansen, Luciane Buchanan, Josh Thomson and Emilie, Gerard Johnstone as chief director, and Jacquelin Perske as writer. Craig Irvin and Samantha Strauss will write the script and Irvin will also direct several episodes. The series is not only based on the classical Chinese story but also adapted from previous movies such as *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons*, and *Journey to the West: Demons Strike Back*. The main character is a young girl who stands for Monk Tang, and is accompanied with three degraded immortals.

In the United States, *Journey to the West* continued to be very popular and a new movie series is being made in 2017, consisting of three parts: *Three Battles with the White Bone Demon*, *The Monkey King caused havoc in Heaven*, and *Tongtian River*. Actors from Taiwan, Hong Kong have joined the cast in an intercultural production that encompasses both Chinese and Western cultural characteristics.

This section has tried to show that under different social and cultural backgrounds, adaptation and dissemination of literary works inevitably leads to cultural variation, and sometimes cultural misreading. We argue that the cultural products of the mass media era, especially the adaptation of classical literary works, should be interpreted within the boundary of the original text, avoiding unrestrained over-rewriting at the entertainment level. In the era of globalization we should seek forms for better integration of source language and culture.

THE MODEL OF CROSS-CULTURAL INTERPRETATION *WOLF TOTEM*

Wang Ning pointed out that from the perspective of the traditional translation hermeneutics, translating should be regarded as a kind of cross-cultural interpretation since it incorporates both the function of language transformation and the function of cross-cultural interpretation. (Wang Ning, 2014)

In the context of globalization, translation is not confined to transposition in different languages. It is more often used to describe transformations that transcend language boundaries and cultural traditions. Taking the example of American translator Howard Goldblatt, this section explores cross-cultural translation of version of the semi-autobiographical novel *Wolf Totem* written by Jiang Rong 姜戎.

Wolf Totem tells the story of the relationship between an educated youth with wolves and herdsmen in the Inner Mongolia grassland in the 1960s. The work not only depicts the encounter between wolves and a human being, but also expresses the author's views on the culture, history, ethnicity and contemporary politics. Jiang Rong wrote several drafts prior to his 54-million-word final version, in a process that lasted 33 years.

In 2004, the novel was published by the Yangtze River Literature and Art Publishing House, and it was reprinted over 150 times according to publishing 2014 statistics. It still ranks among the top 30 of Chinese best-selling fiction, and has received dozens of awards and excellent reviews, also from abroad, such as those by *The New York Times*, *TIME magazine*, *The Times*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, *Der Spiegel*, *Corriere della Sera* and the Associated Press, BBC, CNN and other major European and American media. *Wolf Totem* was issued in 110 countries and regions, and there are thousands of essays and critical studies on the novel. In 2007, *Wolf Totem* won the first Man Asian Literary Prize. In Chinese contemporary literature export downturn, English version of *Wolf Totem* were warmly welcomed by Western scholars and readers, being the model for China's successful export of fiction.

American translator Howard Goldblatt's cross-cultural interpretative translation of *Wolf Totem* gave it a new life in a more academic cultural context, helping promote the work abroad: "To some extent, cold reception and bottlenecks occurred when current Chinese culture and

literature stepping out, and it is due to the lack of cross-cultural interpretation of translation.” (Wang Ning, 2014:5)

A large number of allusions or words reflecting society of the time, Mongolian culture and Chinese history appear in *Wolf Totem*. It requires a faithful translation that keeps to the intention of the original in presenting Chinese culture to the West. Howard Goldblatt’s translation has contributed to facilitate the understanding of Chinese culture to the target readers in his dealing with historical allusions. In addition, Howard Goldblatt has done well in translating the proper nouns of ethnic minorities. For example, the word Pi ao (皮袄) in the original sentence “他看杨克冻得有些发抖，就想解腰带，跟他合披一件皮袍” was translated as “deel” by Howard Goldblatt. Because it is extremely cold in winter in the prairie woolen deels are needed to protect against coldness. By using the word “deel”, Howard Goldblatt described the unique clothing of Chinese Mongolian nomads and clearly conveyed the clothing culture in Chinese minorities. The word Pi’ao and deel manifest the fact that the translator is concerned with the cultural content of source and target languages and with their cultural differences. He pays attention to adapting to the whole cultural system to which the language belongs, and avoids distorting the original. This coincides with Umberto Eco's emphasis on a dynamic interpretation that encompasses author, text, reader, and cultural elements, organically combined to maintain and interpretative balance.

The movie *Wolf Totem* was directed by the French director Jean Jacques Arnold and filmed over five years. The extensive contents of the book and the high degree of difficulty in adaptation made the film the most anticipated one in 2014. After release, it received widespread attention and comments from home and abroad. The film was not disruptive of the book’s content, nor did it substantially modified it. Instead, it retained the original narrative structure and the basic spirit, precisely reflecting cross-cultural characteristics. The original Chinese stressed the relationship between human and nature through the figure of the wolf. The author also led the reader to learn nomads’ survival philosophy, and hinted at human weaknesses, deeply-rooted in Confucian culture. The filmic version focused on the relationship between humans and nature, a theme of universal value, which enabled a cross-cultural narrative compacted through the rhythm of the film.

CONCLUSION

With China's rapid development in technological changes and its impact upon inter-medial practices, the multi-directional cross-cultural approach presented above seeks to provide avenues for intercultural dialogue in a globalized world.

When translating and adapting Chinese classic stories, which convey both the ancient and contemporary cultural memory of the country, discourse needs to be reformulated according to the stricter logical standards used in Western languages. Important semantic layers are lost and even suppressed. The reverse process is even more difficult, as Western languages are unable to capture the multisemic potentialities of Chinese. Indeed, a serious problem occurs when comparatists translate traditional Chinese texts from a Western centrist framework, placing emphasis on the logic aspects of meaning and leaving aside multisemic Chinese colouring. The translated texts convey only a partial message of the original. This semantic loss is not caused by translators' insufficient understanding of the original texts. Rather, it is the result of natural barriers with regards to semantic organization.

Alongside language and translation, an underlying topic in this paper is cross-cultural adaptation. Semiotic barriers lie at the level of language but also at the level of culture, and this affects the way original works are circulated and understood. In the era of globalization, it is important to make Chinese culture effectively "go out", and "walk in", carrying forward Chinese culture and its integration in the world.

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