

On the Translation of Lexical Items with Chinese Characteristics in *The Economist* Based on Lefevere's Rewriting Theory

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Abstract—The *Economist*, as a quite influential newspaper in the western society, began to set up China column in 2012 and has made quite a lot of reports concerning different aspects of China and therefore used many expressions with Chinese characteristics. This paper cited the editorials in the China column as the subjects, trying to analyze why and how the translation of lexical items with Chinese characteristics are rewritten in guidance of the three factors of Lefevere's rewriting theory (ideology, poetics and patronage) and evaluate the rewritten translation to summarize some applicable suggestions to improve domestic translation in this field. This thesis finds that most translations of lexical items with Chinese characteristics in *The Economist* achieve semantic faithfulness but always carry derogatory hints due to discrepancy in ideology, from which Chinese translators may draw a lesson and avoid similar mistakes.

Keywords—Translation; Rewriting Theory; Lexical Items with Chinese Characteristics; *The Economist*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the highly integrated world, accurate transmission of information about China to other nations is of an increasing importance. The lexical items with Chinese characteristics are a miniature of China's social life and cultural heritage and an inexhaustible source of China's latest tidings. Therefore, their translation can never be neglected. However, the lack of equivalents in English gives rise to difficulties in translation, so how overseas media tackle these lexical items may give us some insights. Among a multitude of foreign media which lavish attention on China in recent years, *The Economist* is noteworthy for its wide range of target readers from various countries.

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica Online, "*The Economist* is a weekly magazine of news and opinion published in London and generally regarded as one of the world's preeminent journals of its kind. It provides wide-ranging coverage of general news and particularly international and political developments and prospects bearing on the world's economy." [1] It set up China column in 2012, for China has risen appreciably in latest decades with far-reaching influence on Asia and even the whole world. The editorials of *The Economist* in China column not only concentrate on China's interrelationship with other big powers

but favor subjects close to people's livelihood, giving shape to a unique and vivid style with a large group of lexical items with Chinese characteristics. Therefore, a great many researchers make their study on *The Economist*. Of these researches, some focus on the recipe for its success or its building of China's image from the perspective of journalism and communication. For example, Wang Jilong(2006) put his emphasis on the way in which *The Economist* tapped into overseas market and became a transnational media group in the harsh environment of media field [2]. Feng Xue(2014) drew up the attitude of *The Economist* towards China and its depict of China's image by analyzing the news structure of all the reports of China column in 2014, hoping to improve the reports of native media to build a better state image [3]. Others are on the translation of *The Economist* reports, with the typical one on the author's own E-C translation works of reports or on *The Economist's* translating skills and strategies from textual, sentential and lexical perspectives. A good case in point is Wang Lin(2016), who exhibits a full analysis and reflection of her translation of 12 latest economy-related passages in *The Economist* [4]. However, few focus on its translation of lexical items with Chinese characteristics; if any, it is a simple analysis from the linguistic perspective with little regard to inevitable non-linguistic factors. Cheng Mengting and Zhou Yan (2015) do make a tentative study from lexical perspective, in which they conclude the translating skills with specific cases [5] but it is a pity that they do not have any theoretical support. Hence this thesis is trying to study the translation of lexical items with Chinese characteristics in *The Economist* guided by Lefevere's rewriting theory in the hope of achieving a better framework and making the research more reasonable.

Lefevere pays special attention to cultural factors in translation process and puts forward the rewriting theory – "Translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text" (Lefevere 2004: 7) [6], suggesting that translation is manipulated by three factors: ideology, poetics and patronage. This theory focuses mainly on the translating process rather than the appraisal of the translated work itself. In other words, this theory mainly concerns what factors will and how they will exert an impact on the practice of translation. Under the guidance of this theory, this thesis cites examples from the China column in *The Economist* to analyze the irresistible rewriting of the original information due to non-linguistic factors and discover how underlying factors influence its

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translation, thus providing some experience for later translators at home and abroad and bettering cultural exports in heterogeneous cultures.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The traditional translation theory has long pivoted on linguistic level without any consideration of cultural elements. Until the last 20 years of the 20th century, there was a remarkable cultural turn in translation theory, bringing about more awareness on cultural factors than mere linguistic ones. In this cultural turn, André Alphons Lefevere plays as a leading role, putting forward the concept of “rewriting” in *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*: “Translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text. All rewritings, whatever their intentions, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society.” (Lefevere 2004: 7)[6] He considers all the translation as rewritings of the original texts to some extent to comply with the target culture. All translation is interplay of linguistic system and cultural system. Lefevere proposes that some factors outside the linguistic category exert influence on the translating process, for instance, “issues such as power, ideology, institution and manipulation”. (Lefevere 2004: 2)[6] According to Lefevere, translation is restrained by two factors: the professional and the patronage. The professional refers to the critics, reviewers, teachers and translators, while patronage is “powers (persons, institutions) that can further or hinder the reading, writing, and rewriting of literature”. (Lefevere 2004a: 15)[6] The former may rewrite the source texts to meet specific literary needs and the latter to make them acceptable in target culture. Lefevere says the professional, the first factor, “tries to control the literary system from the inside within the parameters set by the second factors.” (Lefevere 2004a: 14)[6] In the development of rewriting theory, some scholars, such as Snell-Hornby (2001: 40) think the impact of ideology should be differentiated from the category of patronage and poetics[7], therefore, this paper holds the more detailed division: ideology, poetics, and patronage, these three factors, motivate and manipulate the rewriting process.

A. Ideology

In *Constructing Cultures—Essays on Literature Translation* co-edited with Bassnett, Lefevere gives ideology a definition as “the conceptual grid that consists of opinions and attitudes deemed acceptable in a certain society at a certain time and through which readers and translators approach texts”. (Bassnett & Lefevere 2001: 48)[8] In a transcultural context, the constraint of ideology on translation is extremely recognizable because the dominant ideology in target culture and the individual ideology of translators permeate the whole translating process and directly give shape to the translation. With different life experience, the individual ideology of translators varies from person to person. Moreover, readers in different age brackets or in different social class do not share the same ideology. Therefore, it’s inevitable that translators unconsciously rewrite the source texts driven by their own cognition and consciously rewrite to ingratiate their translation

with target readers or affect public ideology for certain purposes. To be more concrete, if the translator doesn’t agree with some views in original texts, he will try to avoid mention or even distort them. Usually, political news translation will rewrite the source texts to maintain state image and social stability, or assimilate government’s attitude into public opinions. Conspicuously, ideological consideration far more outweighs faithful language transformation when the two contradict to each other.

B. Poetics

Lefevere states in *Translation, Rewriting and Manipulation of Literary Fame* that, “A poetics can be said to consist of two components: one is an inventory of literary devices, genres, motifs, prototypical characters and situations, and symbols; the other a concept of what the role of literature is, or should be, in the social system as a whole. The latter concept is influential in the selection of themes that must be relevant to the social system if the work of literature is to be noticed at all. In its formative phase a poetics reflects both the devices and the ‘functional view’ of the literary production dominant in a literary system when its poetics was first codified. Once a poetics is codified, it exerts a tremendous system-conforming influence in the further development of a literary system.” (Lefevere, 2004: 26)[6] According to Lefevere, poetics, with duality, is composed of two components: one is literary view, and the other is functional view. The former refers to basic literary devices and the latter determines what kind of literature can be accepted and may prevail in a specific culture and society. Poetics is not limited in literary research but extends to a broader field covering culture and customs, arts and aesthetics, etc. With society and culture as hidden manipulators of poetics, there is actually a recognizable interplay between poetics and ideology: The functional view of poetics is tightly related to ideology outside the literary system, and the basic literary devices are dominated by the functional view inside the literary system. Translators have to rewrite the original texts to keep their translated works in line with both the ideology and the dominant poetics in target culture, ensuring the smooth access of their translation to the target culture and society. It is noteworthy that the purpose of rewriting from the perspective of ideology is to uphold the dominant thought of the mainstream social class in target culture, while from the perspective of poetics is to increase the readability of translated works for more receptors.

C. Patronage

Patronage, beyond the literary system, refers to “power (persons, institutions) that can further or hinder the reading, writing, and rewriting of literature”. (Lefevere, 2004: 15) [6] Taking Shakespeare’s play writing for example (Lefevere, 2004), Lefevere states the “power” can be religious groups, a political party, a social class, a royal court, publishers and media.[6] If a translated work doesn’t comply with what patronage hopes, it may even fail to be brought to readers in target culture. Like an invisible hand, patronage manipulates the whole rewriting process and has decisive influence on the translated works with three components—ideological component, economic component and status component.

The ideological component, namely the ideology of patronage, determines which subject will be given to the target culture and the direction by which the original text should be rewritten to cater to patronage. Only the acceptable translation to patrons has chances to be published and read, therefore, translators have to serve the ideology of patrons - the publisher and the government, whether the translator himself is in line with it.

The economic component drives the translators to consider the way in which they rewrite to satisfy the needs of the publisher and maximize their earnings; after all, they make a living at least partly from their contribution fee. Moreover, the potential readers' impression, playing a decisive role in the income of patrons, also has an indirect influence on the translation.

The status component refers to that translators have to deepen their relationship with patronage through glorifying their image, upholding their interests and making disparaging remarks about their competitors.

III. TRANSLATION STRATEGIES OF LEXICAL ITEMS WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS IN *THE ECONOMIST*

In terms of rewriting theory, this chapter cites examples from the China column of *The Economist* from 2012 to 2017 to analyze how ideology, poetics and patronage rewrite the original text in translation, evaluate these translations and provide some suggestions.

A. Ideology and Lexical Items with Chinese Characteristics

In translating process, there are far more hidden roles involved than merely original writer and translator, such as government, press and reader. All these roles exert a highly interwoven impact on the final translated works: The translator will adapt the original text into one with a firm stand either for the values advocated by the government and the publishers to ensure that his/ her work can be accepted to gain profits, or for the values welcomed by the people to make sure their rewriting is to their tastes and beneficial to the spread of their work. As a matter of fact, translation is constrained by ideology of these different roles involved conspicuously or unnoticeably in the translating process. Here are some examples:

1) 钓鱼岛:the Diaoyu islands/ the Senkaku islands (*The Economist* 2012-08-25 *Relations on the rocks*)

“钓鱼岛”, a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea known as the Diaoyu islands in China and the Senkaku islands in Japan, has long been a controversy between the two countries in terms of its ownership. Conspicuously, the alternative application of the two names proves that the translator is constrained by ideological factors when translating the name of this territory into English. The question of Diaoyu islands was escalated and became extremely sharp when the Ruyuku government ships bombarded Taiwan's fishermen in 1969 and then the Ishigaki officials placed the boundary marker on the Diaoyu islands after discovering oil reserves on the continental shelf of the Diaoyu islands. According to Qiu Mengying(2018), the stance of the UK on the Diaoyu islands question is always non-interference with an objective attitude to avoid being entangled into a troublesome dispute,whether in

1970s when the question of Diaoyu islands was in the spotlight or in recent years during which it is in abeyance[9]. As *The Economist* is a British magazine with a worldwide popularity, the posture of the UK towards and the uncertainty in the audience's attitude to the sensitive issue encourage the translator to adopt two translated versions to keep consistent with the state's principle and minimize the possible offence to readers, irrespective of whether the translator inclines to China or Japan. In the process of translation, ideology of the government and readers indirectly lead to the ambivalent rewriting. In our own translation, “钓鱼岛” should be “the Diaoyu islands” all the time to show China's zero tolerance to aggression against its territorial integrity.

2) 法轮功 :the Falun Gong spiritual movement (*The Economist* 2014-08-30 *No-cult zone*)

Falun Gong in China is a trick to brainwash people into an evil cult of personality so that the believers form an illegal pyramid organization to fund the leader and to be at his/ her command forever. However, the translator refers to the Falun Gong as a spiritual movement, implying it is just a matter of “freedom of belief” and understating the incalculable man-made misfortunes due to it. Actually, the translation is in accordance with the mainstream attitudes of western media towards Falun Gong. As Sheng Peilin mentions in his thesis after the Tiananmen Square self-immolation of Falun Gong worshipers in 2001: Financial Times claims there is no evidence on whether the immolators are followers of Falun Gong; the Associated Press agitates people by saying that Beijing uses the horrific image of burnt bodies to fight against Falun Gong; the United Press International even blatantly suggests the group self-immolation is the result of China's anti-humanity.[10] We can see that in western dominant notions, the operations to crack down on Falun Gong which has long been consciously embellished as a mind emancipation, have infringed on people's freedom of worship. Here *The Economist* is no exception: The meaning of Falun Gong in translation is artificially deflected to satisfy the need in the mainstream ideology - distorting and assaulting China's human rights. This paper proposes that “法轮功” can be translated as “FaLun Gong, a heresy beguiling people into evil deeds”.

There are many more examples like these: 大陆 mainland China (*The Economist* 2016-01-09 Hong Kong and the mainland), 文化大革命 Mao's Cultural Revolution(*The Economist* 2016-08-06 Unlikely hero), 港独 Hong Kong independence (*The Economist* 2016-08-13 The east is pink), 台独 Taiwanese independence (*The Economist* 2016-08-13 The east is pink), etc.

B. Poetics and Lexical Items with Chinese Characteristics

Rewriting with consideration of poetics takes place when literary devices are not compatible with the prevalent ones in target society. In this case, wording, phrasing and style in translated works may be slightly different from the literal equivalent even though it is a full expression of the original text. Examples are as follows:

1) 老虎苍蝇一起打: higher-ranking “tigers” as well as humble “flies” are in the new leaders’ sights (*The Economist* 2013-07-13 Party campaigns)

“老虎苍蝇一起打”, is a political terminology from Xi Jinping’s speech at the third plenum of 18th Central Commission for Discipline Inspecting, advocating that the government should both investigate the abuse of power in leading group and authorities and address the violations of discipline and law in grassroots units. In the translation, explanative adjectives “higher-ranking” and “humble” are added respectively to “tigers” and “flies”, allowing the translation to not only maintain alien complexion but illuminate the meaning of the two figurative words concisely.

The message that “一起打” conveys is that all wrongdoings must be punished severely no matter who does them. However, the translation replaces the meaning of “take tough measures against” with “be in the new leaders’ sights”, channeling readers’ attention to the role of agent in this practice rather than the practice itself. As a matter of fact, “take tough measures against... as well as...” is capable of conveying the full meaning of “一起打”, the translator diverges from this literal translation to achieve two aims: first, the ultimate purpose of all the information given in the editorial is to keep global readers informed of the overall direction of the governance of China’s new ruling group, hence the center role “new leaders” is pointed out indirectly. Second, the weakening of the “fighting against” act, which unnoticeably understates the determination and force of new leaders to rule the party strictly, complies with the attitudes towards CPC held by most English-speaking countries. Despite the understating of the act itself, the translation can still be used on some occasions to accentuate the role of leaders in anti-corruption campaign.

2) 被请去“喝茶”: be summoned to “take tea” - an euphemism for being interrogated (*The Economist* 2015-07-18 Human rights)

In this translation, the amplification of “a euphemism for being interrogated” is added on the basis of literal translation, further explaining the highly figurative Chinese terminology while maintaining its original characteristics. The translation seems to be impeccable, nevertheless, the words “being interrogated” is an underlying betrayal of faithfulness to the original text. In effect, “take tea” refers to the talks with the party members conducted by Commissions for Discipline Inspection to supervise the practice of obeying inner-party discipline. This sort of talks is not necessarily the omen of illegal behavior but the mind education against infidelity to the party. “Being interrogated”, in its narrow sense, distorts “take tea” as a terrifying experience far from a regular measure of party governance to rectify the party’s ethos, which reflects the stereotype of stiff CPC in the translator’s mind and even many readers. This paper suggests that “被请去‘喝茶’” be translated as “be summoned to ‘take tea’ - an euphemism for being educated about party discipline”.

There are many more examples like these: 壮士断腕 a warrior cutting his own wrist (*The Economist* 2017-03-11 Caretaker of the chrysalis), 赤脚医生 barefoot doctor (*The Economist* 2017-05-13 Shod but still shoddy), 啃老族

bite-the-old tribe (*The Economist* 2012-01-28 Ant tribes and mortgage slaves), 喊破嗓子不如甩开膀子 “screaming yourself hoarse” was not as good as “rolling up your sleeves and getting to work” (*The Economist* 2013-03-23 The new prime minister), etc.

C. Patronage and Lexical Items with Chinese Characteristics

What patronage does in translation is to provide translators with political asylum, economic sufficiency and social status, allowing their translation to be acceptable in the target culture. Therefore, patronage brings about rewriting in translated works out of three components - ideological component, economic component and status component. The direct patronage of translation and writing is financial groups who hold huge share of news institutions, and another indirect patron is government who needs to safeguard its decency. To avoid becoming the puppet of political or commercial groups, the Economist Group adopted the scheme that Pearson Inc. and individual shareholders hold half of shares respectively, and most individual shareholders are staff of *The Economist*. In other words, the patrons of *The Economist* are the publisher and government. Here are some examples:

1) 改造地主、反革命分子 the purges of landlords and other counter-revolutionaries (*The Economist* 2016-07-02 Investment abroad)

The term of “改造地主”, coined during China’s land reform, refers to the practice of expropriating landlords’ land and dispensing the land to the poor and the middle-class peasants while leaving a fraction for landlords to live self-reliantly. Herein the translator makes a jejune generalization about the practice as “purge”. According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, “purge” means “to remove people from an organization, often violently, because their opinions or activities are unacceptable to the people in power”, [11] which reveals a vestige of pejorative sense and hence a slight departure from the original connotation of “改造地主”. On the one hand, the ideological component of patronage plays an important role in this rewriting. The US is a capitalist country with the respect for each one’s property while China is a socialist country with communism as the ultimate goal. The dichotomy between the two destines that the UK government will regard the practice as a trespass on others’ property and dissent from it. Tenacious opposition of the government to this practice, throttling the desire of some people for such reform and stabilizing the UK, should be inviolable in the ideology of the government and therefore expressed clearly in the translation. On the other hand, the status component requires translators deepen and further their relations with patrons through retouching their images or making disparaging remarks about their competitors. In this case, the translator of “改造地主” evinces stiff opposition to the political and cultural kernel of China under the pressure of the patrons, irrespective of whether the translator is pro-China or not. As far as the paper is concerned, “transform landlords and other counter-revolutionaries into revolutionaries” may be closer to the original meaning of “改造地主、反革命分子”.

2) “一带一路”: *On Belt One Road(OBOR)/ Belt and Road (The Economist 2015-04-11 Where all Silk Roads lead/ The Economist 2017-05-06 All aboard the belt-and-road express)*

In September, 2013, Premiere Xi launched the initiative of making joint efforts to develop The Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road during the state visit to Central Asia and Indonesia. The Belt and the Road are known collectively as “一带一路”, to which the official translation originally given by China government is “One Belt and One Road(OBOR)”. On September 20, 2015, China government announced to comprehensively replace OBOR with “Belt and Road”. With brevity as the fundamental principle, the two versions are typical Chinese translations of political and economic terms that compress the main information.

Apparently, *The Economist* always adopts and keeps abreast of the official translations of China in relevant editorials, which is a part of their business strategy of getting closer to Chinese ideology to reap considerable profits. As the newspaper market in western world has been almost saturated, the Economic Group casted its strategic sight on China, a land awaiting inflow of English newspaper. Their ambition in gaining the favor of untold Chinese readers brings a general adoption of China’s official translation that will flatter Chinese readers in the translation of lexical items with Chinese characteristics, in spite of the information omission in the official translations. Besides, As *The Economist* is tapping into China, the writers, also the translators of lexical items with Chinese characteristics, have to keep pace with the publisher to get their salary or economic allowance. Therefore, the ideological and economic considerations of patronage manipulate the translation of “一带一路”.

There are many more examples: 四个全面 Four Comprehensives (*The Economist* 2015-03-07 Comprehensive education) , 四个意识 Four Consciousness (*The Economist* 2016-03-19 This insubstantial pageant), 密切联系群众 get closer to the people (*The Economist* 2013-10-05 Critical masses), 大陆 China’s mainland (*The Economist* 2016-01-09 Hong Kong and the mainland), etc.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the modern world with highly interwoven culture, China is active in enhancing its cultural influence to establish a favorable state image and earn savory reputation; therefore, the translation of lexical items with Chinese characteristics becomes the main preoccupation to which drawing on the useful experience of western media is conducive. Cross-cultural translation is never a simple literal equivalence

or a single meaning transmission but often a deviation due to specific components. From the perspective beyond the lexical level, Lefevere’s rewriting theory explicitly claims ideology, poetics and patronage are the three components that constrain the translation process. With editorials from the China column of *The Economist* as samples, this thesis employs rewriting theory to the practice of translation of lexical items with Chinese characteristics, probing into the influence of the three components and putting forward some suggestions to later translators. This thesis finds most translations of lexical items with Chinese characteristics in *The Economist* are faithful at the semantic level. However, on the grounds of the difference in ideology, there are ineluctably some derogatory hints from which Chinese translators should draw a lesson and avoid similar mistakes in translation.

Regretfully, this thesis fails to cite adequate convincing examples to justify that the translation of lexical items with Chinese characteristics in *The Economist* is rewritten. The China-related editorials are also habitué of the Leader Column with a more in-depth argumentation, in which the research could have gathered more translations. Besides, there is limited space for the introduction of the rewriting theory.

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