

# A Study of Defamiliarization Devices in the Translation of *The Moon Opera*

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**Abstract**—Defamiliarization is a literary term originally put forward by the Russian formalist Shklovsky. It refers to the fact that in literary creation, the author can describe things in strange and novel ways, thus extending the readers' perception time and increasing aesthetic pleasure. Later, the term is gradually applied to the field of translation, and defamiliarized translation skills evolve. Defamiliarized translation mainly refers to keeping the cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of the source language as much as possible in the process of translation, which makes aesthetic appreciation difficult. Literary translation can preserve the literariness and artistry of the original text by means of defamiliarized translation. Taking the English translation of Bi Feiyu's novel *The Moon Opera* as the object of study, this paper analyzes the translation means and effects of defamiliarization from the phonetic aspect, lexical aspect and syntactic aspect in order to provide some reflections on the translation of contemporary Chinese novels. In the translation process of *The Moon Opera*, out of respect for the original text, the original author and Chinese culture, the translator adopts defamiliarization translation through transliteration plus explanation, literal translation and free translation to retain the exotic flavor of the original text, producing an "alienation" effect and bringing a fresh aesthetic experience to the readers in the target language. This slightly challenging aesthetic process brings great aesthetic pleasure to the target language readers and promotes the communication between different cultures.

**Keywords**—Chinese-English translation; defamiliarization; defamiliarized translation skills; *The Moon Opera*

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to Jacobson, translation can be divided into intralingual translation, intersemiotic translation and interlingual translation. (Susan Bassnett, 2010, 22) The research object of translation discipline is often interlingual translation, because it highlights the communication between different cultures. As an important carrier of human culture, the translation of literary works plays an important role in the communication and transmission between different cultures. In recent years, more and more Chinese literary works have gone abroad and started their foreign trips. One of the more difficult problems for translators translating Chinese to foreign languages is how to make effective conversion between different language modes of thinking. Therefore, it is necessary to draw on the translated texts of existing works

to summarize the beneficial experience. The novel *The Moon Opera* is Bi Feiyu's representative work. Its English translation, co-translated by the American remarkable translator Howard Goldblatt and his wife Lijun Lin, has been a huge success abroad and was shortlisted for The Independent's foreign fiction awards in 2008. In the process of translation, the translator, on the principle of faithfulness and accuracy, adopts defamiliarization translation methods to retain the linguistic and cultural style of the original text to the greatest extent and thus stimulate readers' reading interest and aesthetic pleasure.

## II. DEFAMILIARIZATION AND ITS APPLICATION IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

"Defamiliarization" is a literary term initially put forward by Shklovsky of Russia, which refers to the fact that in the literary creation, the author deliberately describes things in the strange and novel ways, forcing people to find new things even when faced with something familiar so as to prolong the time of attention and increase the aesthetic feeling". Therefore, it can be said that defamiliarization is a fundamental characteristic of literature. Later defamiliarization has been gradually applied to the field of translation, and defamiliarization translation techniques have evolved.

Defamiliarization translation is a translation strategy that emphasizes the literary expression of the target text, retaining the cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of the source language, and making aesthetic appreciation difficult. In literary translation, readers in the target language hold a novel aesthetic expectation of the translated text and defamiliarization translation means just keep its exotic flavor, making readers understand and respect the culture of the source language, appreciate the charm of foreign culture and enrich the expressions in the target language so that the purpose of cultural collision and communication is achieved.

## III. THE MOON OPERA AND ITS ENGLISH VERSION

*The Moon Opera* is one of the representative works of Bi Feiyu, a famous Chinese writer. *The Moon Opera* was created in 1999 and when it was published, it caused great repercussions in the literary circle. It won the best novella award in 2000. The TV series adapted from the novel,

starring Fan Xu, Biao Fu and other powerful actors, was also well received.

The novel tells the story of Xiao Yanqiu who is a Peking opera actress. Xiao Yanqiu, the troupe pillar, rises to fame because of the role of Chang'e. In a fit of diva jealousy, Xiao Yanqiu disfigures her understudy with boiling water. Spurned by the troupe, she turns to teaching. Twenty years later, a rich cigarette-factory boss offers to underwrite a restaging of the cursed opera, but only on the condition that Xiao Yanqiu returns to the role of Chang'e. But she is no longer a young girl in her prime; Peking opera is no longer independent of the market economy. In order to become the immortal moon goddess, Xiao Yanqiu reduces weight desperately, betrays herself to the boss, and even conducts abortion. However, she cannot confront reality and she couldn't stop Chunlai from taking the stage. Among the cheers of the audience towards Chunlai, Xiao Yanqiu is breakdown mentally and sings the last scene of the play wearing costumes for her Chang'e in the snow outside the theatre.

The English version of *The Moon Opera* is co-translated by the remarkable translator Howard Goldblatt and his wife, Sylvia Li-chun Lin. Lin studied western languages and literature at Tamkang university in Taiwan before moving to the United States to study east Asian culture and comparative literature. She is currently an associate professor in the department of East Asian language and literature at the university of Notre Dame. She devotes herself to the study of Chinese women and culture, narrative theory and so on. In addition, her interest and practice in the field of translation won her the Liang Shiqiu literary translation award. Howard Goldblatt is a famous Sinologist and translator of Chinese literature, who is called to be the chief translator of modern and contemporary Chinese literature by Xia Zhiqing. Over the past 30 years, Goldblatt has been immersed in Chinese culture and literature, and has translated approximately 40 literary works by some Chinese writers, including the Biography of Hulan River by Xiao Hong, the Red Sorghum family by Mo Yan and so on. He also writes edits many books and magazines on Chinese literature, and establishes the academic magazine Modern Chinese Literature.

#### IV. DEFAMILIARIZATION DEVICES IN THE ENGLISH VERSION OF *THE MOON OPERA*

*The Moon Opera* has distinct cultural characteristics with the vivid language and a wealth of rhetorical devices, such as metaphor, parallelism, pun, irony, and etc. It tells the heavy story in the joking and intellectual language. In order to let readers of the target language appreciate its unique artistic charm, the translator adopts the translation methods of defamiliarization in the translation process, which maximize the reproduction of the literariness and artistry of the original work and stimulate the readers' aesthetic pleasure.

##### A. Transliteration Plus Explanation on the Phonetic Level

Example 1: 《奔月》阴气过重，即使上，也得配一个铜锤花脸压一压，这样才守得住。(毕飞宇 2006:26)

Translated version: *The Moon Opera* was too feminine, contained far too much yin. If they insisted on staging it, they should have balanced the roles with a male singing character. (Bi Feiyu 2009: 7)

Yin qi, in the study of Yin and Yang and the five elements, is opposite to Yang qi and generally refers to one of the two opposites, which also refers to feminine qi. There is too much Yin qi in *The Moon Opera*, which means the need for male masculinity to balance. Hualian mainly plays such bold male in Peking opera as who is heavier than the steady Wusheng. Therefore, it is said that they should have balanced the roles with a male singing character. In order to acquaint the western readers who do not know the balance of Yin and Yang, the translator explains the meaning of "Yin" with "feminine" and then retains its pinyin. In this way, readers can distance themselves from the aesthetic appreciation of the text and enjoy the beauty of foreign cultures.

##### B. Literal Translation on the Lexical Level

Example 2: 重新回到剧团的老团长远远地打量着筱燕秋，嘟囔说：“这孩子，黄连投进了苦胆胎，命中 就有两根青衣的水袖。”(毕飞宇 2006:30)

Translated version: And as he watched her up on the stage, the old troupe leader, who had only recently taken up his post again, muttered, "That girl knows the taste of bitter gall. She was born to wear water sleeves." (Bi Feiyu 2009: 5)

"黄连投进了苦胆胎" is used to describe the demanding requirement that the Peking opera field has on Qingyi. In Chinese, there are such words as "my life is bitter than coptis", "coptis" and "bitter gall" are extremely bitter things. The English translation employs "bitter gall" to retain the image of "gall" and conveys the same meaning defamiliarization. According to Lefevere, "from a technical point of view, poetic diction can be perfectly translated" (Lefevere 49). Xiao Yanqiu plays Chang'e that lives alone in the moon in *The Moon Opera* and she, in real life, is also in the lifelong anguish full of the tragedy in the drama. The translator perfectly shows the bitterness of Qingyi through the "water sleeves" and "bitter gall" and makes readers in the target language get to know the role of Qingyi character in the Peking Opera better.

Example 3: 李雪芬在大会上说：“为了剧团的明天，我愿意做好传帮带：我愿意把我的舞台经验无私地 传授给筱燕秋同志，做一根合格的接力棒。”(毕飞宇 2006:32)

Translated version: At the cast meeting she rose to say, "For the future of the troupe, I shall be happy to devote myself to the training of others, to selflessly make my experience on the stage available to Comrade Xiao Yanqiu, and to pass the baton in a worthy manner." (Bi Feiyu 2009: 6)

"接力棒" is the short stick used in the relay competition, which the athletes pass to each other, and it reflects a kind of team spirit. Li Xuefen says "做一根合格的接力棒", which means that she is a cooperative person and is willing to pass on her own arena experience selflessly to Xiao Yanqiu. In the Chinese expression, we often say "words cannot express all one intends to say", and it is because of the existence of

"image" that the expressive power of "speech" is improved and the "meaning" is enriched. Thus readers feel that "the meaning is not yet done" (Liu Huawen 2006). The translators retain the traditional Chinese cultural images of "接力棒", which, on the one hand, reproduces the literariness of the original text, and on the other hand, enriches expressions in the target language without affecting the readers' understanding.

Example 4: 没有烟厂的启动资金,《奔月》只能是水中月。(毕飞宇 2006:47)

Translated version: *The Moon Opera* would be nothing more than the moon in the water. (Bi Feiyu 2009: 15)

"水中月" is originally the diction in Chinese Buddhism, which is used to describe the unreal scene and the unobtainable entity. This sentence shows the decisive role that the capital from the tobacco factory plays in the successful performance of *The Moon Opera*. The translator's reservation of the image of "水中月" is inseparable from the translator's view of translation. Goldblatt (2002) once said: "in the past, readers preferred serious works; now, readers prefer light reading. Readers like works that embody an exotic flavor." Translators believe that translation is rewriting under the premise of faithfulness, and the acceptance of readers in the target language should be taken into consideration. Therefore, the translation of these images through defamiliarization will not affect the readers' understanding, but also transplant the cultural images of the source language into the target language so that readers in the target language can feel the language heterogeneity.

Example 5: 她的嗓音还是那样地根深叶茂。炳璋还没有来得及诧异,一阵惊喜已经袭上了心头。一个贪婪而又充满悔恨的嫦娥已经站立在他的面前了。(毕飞宇 2006:65)

Translated version: Her singing had the same depth of roots and breadth of canopy as ever, and Bingzhang was deprived of even a moment to be surprised, as unexpected joy flooded his heart and a greedy yet remorseful Chang'e materialized before him. (Bi Feiyu 2009: 20)

"根深叶茂" refers to the fact that if the root is deep, leaves will flourish, which is used to describe the solid foundation of things. "根深叶茂" is employed to describe Xiao Yanqiu's voice, which implies that Xiao Yanqiu is still good at the Peking opera performance although she has not been on the stage for almost twenty years. Liu Chongde (1991) believes that retaining the content and language form of the original text can achieve the purpose of spreading foreign cultures and expanding the horizon of target language readers. The translator keeps the figure of speech of the original text through the literal translation, which reproduces the image of Xiao Yanqiu with the profound performance. On the one hand, the translator faithfully reproduces the artistry of the original text; on the other hand, defamiliarization translation helps increase readers' reading interest in the translated text.

### C. Free Translation on the Syntactical Level

Example 6: 炳璋闭上眼睛,把右手插进裤子的口袋,跷起了四只手指头,慢慢地敲了起来,一个板,三个眼,再一个板,再三个眼。(毕飞宇 2006:65)

Translated version: With his eyes shut, he thrust his right hand into his pants pocket and curled his fingers to drum the beat: hard soft-soft-soft, hard soft-soft-soft. (Bi Feiyu 2009: 20)

"板"和"眼" are the beats in Peking opera with "板" being the strong beat and "眼" being the weak beat. The translator translates "一个板,三个眼" into "hard soft-soft-soft", which conveys well the numerical meaning of "one" and "three" and reproduces the rhythm of the original text. When readers try to get information, their perception is extended accordingly. The translator adopts the defamiliarization translation method to transplant the form and content of the original text to the translated text through "soft-soft-soft" instead of "3 softs" so that readers in the target language can appreciate the unique charm of the beat in Peking opera.

## V. CONCLUSION

Defamiliarization translation can help readers in the target language understand and respect the culture of the source language and enrich the expression of the target language by faithfully reproducing the artistic expression and literariness of the source language. In the translation process of *The Moon Opera*, out of respect for the original text, the original author and Chinese culture, the translator adopts defamiliarization translation through transliteration plus explanation, literal translation and free translation to retain the exotic flavor of the original text, producing the "alienation" effect and bringing a fresh aesthetic experience to the readers in the target language. Although these defamiliarization effects will extend the discrimination time of the target language readers and bring some difficulties to their aesthetic appreciation, it is this slightly challenging aesthetic process that brings great aesthetic pleasure to the target language readers and promotes the communication between different cultures.

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