The Different Effects of Translating Non-fictions and Fictions on Cultural Reconstruction

—— Case Study on Chen Shou’s Records of the Three Kingdoms and Luo Guanzhong’s Romance of the Three Kingdoms

Mei Dong

English Department, Sichuan Agricultural University, Ya’an, Sichuan, 625014, China

Corresponding author: Dong Mei: 229954718@qq.com

Abstract. Cultural reconstruction is an inevitable and necessary process in this modern world with more and more cross-cultural communications. With the development and adjustment of the culture, there would be the cultural reconstruction containing and displaying a strong sense of recreativity, which in turn would lead to advancement of the original culture. In order to reach a better state, it’s crucial to learn the reconstruction’s foundation, the original culture well, and the assistance of translating activities is indispensable. While there are so many ways to strengthen the understanding and application of certain culture, going to research it based on studying classical literary works related with this culture would be a good and effective way. Generally speaking, the literary works are divided into non-fictions and fictions. Applying the translating of these works to understand and spread the concerned culture will surely have different effects on cultural reconstruction. Thus, taking Chen Shou’s Records of the Three Kingdoms and Luo Guanzhong’s Romance of the Three Kingdoms as examples, this article is to discuss the different effects caused by translating non-fictions and fictions on cultural reconstruction.

Keywords: Cultural Reconstruction; Effects; Translating; Non-fiction; Fiction

1 Introduction

With the fast development of the society, people are not only satisfied with obtaining the basic essentials for making a living. They are requiring a profound enjoyment of living a rich life. With globalization, people have to get more in touch with the outside world. People nowadays would go deep into the root to check the real connotations based on the understanding of at least two languages and the ability to make exchanging use of them. The essential point here is about the ability and level of translation. Translating activities are increasingly indispensable, which puts forward various broader and higher requirements so as to reach a meaningful and effective trans-cultural communication. With these translating activities, the translated objects should be carefully chosen for every culture would really cover numerous fields. At this
critical moment, classical literary works stand out and prove themselves to be excellent choices.

The development of a culture would never only be about its own business. Only when it refers to the promotion of the whole as a unity can the development become an advancement. The world itself is a community with a shared future, and so, all members inside should be responsible for contributing to its evolution and improvement. Only when the single individuals and the community as a whole both develop well can it be a really well-developing culture, in which mutual suggestions, supports and supplements based on good communications play central roles. Good communication is based on a good understanding of the targeted culture and its related culture. Meanwhile, good communication will promote the development of the concerned cultures. These deep understandings with the assistance of the translating activities would open the door to a brighter road. Then, there would be maintenance of the essential points that can endure the test of time and history and there would be changes, which in fact is the process leading to cultural reconstruction. And then the cultural reconstruction is in turn the most positive stimulus for the advancement of the human civilization.

2 The Connotation and Significance of Cultural Reconstruction

A good society would never just be static with no changes. All cultures agree with the famous saying, “Time and tide wait for no man.” It means that the actual changes do take place now and then. Heraclitus says that “You cannot step twice into the same river.”[1] Saint Mencius emphasizes the importance of the harmony arising from favorable climatic, geographical and human conditions. All these emphasize that every moment is unique and all factors are interrelated, only when they keep changing with the time and tide till they reach an equilibrium will the world be an ideal and excellent one. The culture is ever changing with so many variable factors.

Culture is the accumulation of ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society, which are the recordings and reflections of human beings’ collective wisdom after their never-stopping practice and brain-wracking thinking. Of course, not all experiences and conclusions could be generalized into culture. Only those essential and valuable points would be maintained in culture. Even so, it doesn’t mean that the remained ones would never be changed. The changes of other related factors would cause the changes in a certain culture. There are full of examples to attest to the fact that cultural factors would change now and then.

The connotative feature of being changeable for culture can naturally lead to the conclusion that cultural reconstruction would be a natural phenomena. Just as the words contained indicate, cultural reconstruction means the construction of the already existed culture for the second, third or more times. There are all kinds of changes in the society and they would surely lead to changes in the related cultures, thus there would always be inevitable cultural reconstructions. What is important here would not be the frequency displayed in the numbers but the recreative effects arising from these repeated changes. There would never be doubts concerning whether there are these
cultural reconstructions, but about the degree and consequences which they would lead to. Then, to make a reasonable and sensible judgment, the other connotative feature of culture, its selectivity, counts for much. The formation of culture would unavoidably contain selection, which is based on the evaluation of whether the ideas, customs or behaviors deserve the emphasis and then the integration of them into the culture.

As far as cultural reconstruction is concerned, no matter how small the changes are, there would necessarily occur at least two stages of selections: the first is about selecting the data from all synchronic information to form a culture and the second is about selecting whether to agree or disagree with replacing the original factors in a culture with the diachronic changes.

Actually, a culture would not be established without certain groups’ long-time examination, practice and checking. It’s not easy to recognize the importance and value of certain conceptions from the tremendous information collected by a certain group after quite a long time. Even though the selecting process could be subconscious or even unconscious, it must be there. The process of establishing a certain culture is mainly related with the comparison of the related data simultaneously. It is the consequence of a synchronic comparison, which means whether the factors in a certain group should be contained in its culture would be determined by their actual significance and effects at that right moment the culture begins to be formed. Although the result of these selections seems to be made in an instant, there’s a long time consideration concerning their past, present and even future. Thus, the finally selected ones would be closely related with the essence of the culture.

Indeed, as long as a culture is formed, it’s not easy to make big changes. However, it’s still undoubted that there are full of challenges for the existed cultures because the process of forming and developing a culture would never be straight, during which it’s inevitable for the problem of making choices to appear. These selections are of course carried out by human beings, thus, as a consequence, each culture would naturally carry the characteristic of being subjective. The unique and central point for subjectivity is its close relationship with the mind. Descartes says that “there is no need for minds to be confined at all within limits; for neither does the knowing of one truth have an effect like that of the acquisition of one art and prevent us from finding out another, it rather aids us to do so...”[2] Most other things can be confined into a certain scope but not the subjectivity, whose decisive factor, mind, can’t be confined. Subjectivity means flexibility because the permission of taking subjective factors into account means a more profound and complete understanding for the targeted subject, culture included. Even for the subject itself, subjectivity is something abstract that no one can precisely explain and grasp, which can only be understood from a general perspective and thus which would be treated differently by different people at different times. Human beings’ essential nature would not be changed, but they should adjust themselves according to the outside world, that’s where the role of subjectivity plays. No matter how hard one tries, subjective moods and thoughts would keep changing. At a certain spot or a relatively short period, it’s not easy to notice the changes. However, from a diachronic viewpoint, there are always obvious changes. All these changes would be reflected in the development of a culture, getting culture set up on the basis of long time accumulation follow the trend of the times. While it endures all the tests, a culture would keep
its essential points and make changes in accordance with the requirement of time and tide. Thus, it goes to reconstruction.

The formation of a culture is the result of a simultaneous decision. In fact, the decision is actually settled after examining the past for its origin and checking the present for its effects. While it is established, culture should keep on developing itself according to the changes of the outside world and making itself never lag behind others and realize its anticipation for the future. The pace-keeping one is actually a process of cultural reconstruction, which is undoubtedly unavoidable and necessary. Only when cultural reconstruction is there, the original culture would not be abandoned in the long history of human beings’ civilization. Cultural reconstruction stands for the classical and precious value its origin contains, for the great and splendid achievements its present reaches, and for the bright and profound effects its future goes to.

3 The Significance of Translating Classical Literary Works on Cultural Reconstruction

If a culture wants to get itself developed and sustained well, it must be noticed, acknowledged and even admired by others. The recognition and acceptance by others would be necessarily based on two factors: the culture holds a solid foundation strong enough for it to be tested and sustained as well as a precious significance for it to benefit all. In this modern world where globalization has become so common, not to say for a group, even for a single individual, cross-cultural communication becomes essentially necessary, which means both the native culture and other related cultures should be understood and then could be well applied.

When different factors meet and get connected with each other, there would surely be some changes for them for their mutual influence. The best state of the ecological world is the point where it achieves ecological balance. Human beings should also obey the rules for all living creatures, that is, being a member in a harmonious unity and trying to keep this equilibrium, which is the best way to make different factors coexist together. In the ancient times, people just tried their best to satisfy their physical needs. Nowadays, the development of the society has paved an excellent way for human beings to fulfill their spiritual and mental pursuit with setting up a unified community with a shared future with the metaphysical achievement of reaching the ecological civilization, regarding the cultural harmony as the focus. As an important member in this modern world to promote the advancement of the human beings’ civilization, China has established itself as a leading power and never stopped contributing its own efforts to retaining the world’s peace and development, putting forward the conception that the construction of ecological civilization is the fundamental plan to the sustainable development of the Chinese nation ever since the 18th National Congress.[3]

Under modern conditions, no single culture can keep going without getting linked with other cultures. As different cultures, there must be lots of different cultural phenomena and then some misunderstandings necessary to be unlocked. Basil Hatim says that “in the regrettable but not uncommon situation of cross-cultural misunderstandings, which often result in or from a breakdown in communication, what is at the root of
the problem is invariably a set of misconceptions held by one party about how the other rhetorically visualizes and linguistically realizes a variety of communicative objectives."[4] Under such circumstances, translation, the key to solve the problem of cross-cultural communication would stand out and translators would be crucial here for “Human actions or activities are carried out by ‘agents’, individuals playing roles.”[5] Translation attaches emphasis to understanding the cultural connotation in-between the lines and behind the words, since language is the basis for translating activities as well as the best carrier of culture. The precise translation would set up a more solid foundation for understanding another culture and thus leading to a better communication, during which, even the tiny and subtle details should not be ignored for a great strength would result from long time accumulation of even very tiny points. Meet with a culture, take care of the details, go deep into its connotation, get it connected with time and reality and avoid or at least lessen those so called “small mistakes”, then, there would be the promotion of understanding and application of the culture.

In this all closely-related world, if a culture just takes too much care of itself, the culture could not get improved. The improvement of a culture must rely on its timely changes based on its communication with other cultures. While other cultures are concerned, the biggest barrier would be different languages. Then translation is inevitably necessary here. When the significance of translation for cross-cultural communication is really realized, the problem about what should be the translation target arises. Culture covers so much that choosing material for translation should give priority to such factors as its value and significance as well as the requirements of the time and the efficiency it will lead to. At this critical moment, literary works, especially the canons, the classical ones, would be suitable choices. While talking about the western canons, Harold Bloom draws conclusion on their typical characteristics. He says that “The Canon, a word religious in its origins, has become a choice among texts struggling with one another for survival... Nothing is so essential to the Western Canon as its principles of selectivity.”[6] One of the fundamental characteristics of classical works is its selectivity. These are works selected from a large amount of sources and they are time-tested. As nature of human beings, only those resonating with the information receiver would lead to further study, interest and thinking. If one wants to know more accurately about a culture, the concerned classical works would be a suitable access. A literary work is a miniature of the culture, thus all perspectives applied in discussing a culture could be adopted in analyzing it.

In the process of cross-cultural communication, two or more different cultures would meet with and conflict with each other, leading to two different kinds of results: they would keep the state of being opponents and always rival against each other; or they would make adjustment to reach a harmonious state and thus weakening, even eradicating the conflict, which is a double-win choice for all. Understanding each other is the basis for cross-cultural communications and in turn these communications will also improve the understanding of cultures. As far as the adjustments or changes are concerned, it is on the way to cultural reconstruction, in which translating activities would play the indispensably essential role. Therefore, it’s no doubt that translating the literary works is a really significant process for the ubiquitous vital process of cultural reconstruction.
4 The Effects of Translating Different Literary Works on Cultural Reconstruction

For cross-cultural communication is always on an upward trend, changes and adjustments take place now and then for each related culture, together with the assistance of translating activities with an ever-increasing level, there would surely be an all-round cultural reconstruction. A certain culture is closely connected with a certain group of people and a specific social environment, which are usually changeable. Cultural reconstruction means retaining constant changes to keep pace with the times while maintaining the essential points with deliberation and hard efforts. As long as the culture develops in a normal and positive way, the cultural reconstruction is an inevitable and indispensable process of renovation and improvement. To keep the cultural reconstruction optimistic and intense, it’s foundation, the original culture should be consolidated, which is in turn based on a solid and practical value to support its existence and a correct and deep understanding to reinforce its influence. During this recycling process, translating activities stand out for usually at least two different languages would be concerned.

As the best carrier of culture, literature offers a shortcut to learn about the related culture. Reading through the literary works would surely lead to a deeper and broader understanding of the culture. Because literary works can be divided into different types, it’s certain that different books selected to assist the understanding of a culture would lead to different effects at last. Generally, according to the degree to which the agreement between the literary works and the reality achieve, there are two kinds of literary works: the fictions, those ones feature imagination; the non-fictions, those ones feature reality. Among various types of literary works, novels and historical books could be typical representatives of the fictions and non-fictions respectively. It’s no doubt that novels would be chosen by most readers for that imaginary part would infuse them with novelty, interest and curiosity. In contrast, few people would care much about the historical books because it’s part of human beings’ nature to approach things that are more closely related with their life.

Generally speaking, the fictions are different from the non-fictions for their displaying of the imaginative factors. Fictions put more emphasis on the effect of stimulating the readers’ subjective interest and then cause their strong and profound responsiveness. The fictions would make the most of the imagination and create works filled with original conceptions. The effects of appreciating fictions mainly focus on two aspects: the first is to deepen the understanding and thinking of the readers who have similar experiences before; the other is to expand the horizon and insight of the reader with the strange experience that the reader has never met with before. While preparing the works, the author would spend long time making choices from piles of information. The first standard for the author to make judgement on the selections would be how intense the feelings the promising works would arouse and how strong the influences they would have. Meanwhile, when a reader goes to choose the reading objects, the foremost factor would be about how much enthusiasm the work would produce. Thus, when the writers get connected with the readers in the fictional works, there would be the strong and subjective moods and feelings coming together with the
narration of the events, each would recall what they have met with before, go to retrospection and look forward to a new future. Fiction-writing offers the writer a good place to expose the strong passion and emotion the outside world and even sometimes his own ego grant. Fiction-reading offers the readers the chance to know how others would manage the problems they both face with, lessening the degree of trouble in their real life, and also the chance to go into another world full of freshness and originality, fulfilling themselves more for they become familiar with those scenes seldom or even not occurring in their ordinary life.

The Yopps say that “While fiction is established in developing empathy, reading non-fiction provides the opportunity to prompt discussion and comprehension activities that can’t be provided by stories”. Compared with fictions, non-fictions would offer other kinds of experience and acquisition for they focus on depicting the reality instead of displaying the imagination. Non-fiction writers describe the cases and phenomena according to their exact situation in real life and the events are displayed almost in their original state, thus no other way can offer information so close to the fact. To release one’s own feelings, fictional works would be good choices, but if people want to learn clearly about the reality, non-fictional works would be better choices. It’s true that fictions would be more subjective than non-fictions, in other words, non-fictions are more objective than fictions. However, it doesn’t mean that each of them could just carry one typical character, either just being subjective or being objective. All literary works would focus on human beings who are the real center of the world. No matter how far the arts go, their root still stays in the real life of the human beings. Thus, the subjective moods in the fictions can’t be separated with the objective experience of the writers and the readers as well. The objective fact in the non-fictions would also show the writers’ and readers’ different likes and dislikes.

While fictional works cover so much because human beings’ imagination and emotion could be awakened under any condition, non-fictional works are usually confined into a smaller scope because a large part of true things in life belong to common sense and few people would write them down. Some non-fictional works would only be cared by a very small group. For these different characteristics and styles, fictions and non-fictions would surely have different effects on the people and the environment, especially when different cultures are involved. Thus the conclusion can be drawn that when cross-cultural communication is concerned, it’s better to choose non-fictional works because its main purpose is about understanding the background culture, which requires the support of serious, exact and objective data. However, there are actually much less non-fictional works than fictional works. Furthermore, even in a native environment, people would not be so interested in non-fictions, not to say in a foreign culture with the barriers set up by different languages. So far, it’s natural that there would not be so obvious an effect for reading and even less for translating non-fictional works because translation arises from the demanding. The paradox here is that the effects of reading and translating fictions would be even more obvious because of the stronger contrast formed by more people willing to choose fictional works with the help of translations. There’s an authentic example in China attesting to these contrasting effects: the typical representative of non-fictional work, Chen Shou’s historical book, *Records of the Three Kingdoms* and the typical
representative of fictional work, Luo Guanzhong’s novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. There’s no other more matched counterparts of literary works that are so closely related with each other while displayed with totally different styles. However, people don’t attach equal attention to them and it becomes evident that they would have different influences on the people related and their culture, causing different effects on cultural reconstruction eventually.

It’s no doubt that the Three Kingdoms Period is such a special period in China: a dynasty with the separation of three powers to control the whole China land. Chen Shou’s *Records of the Three Kingdoms* is about the history of the three kingdoms, Wei, Shu and Wu, from the first year of Emperor Wen of Wei’s reign to the first year of Emperor Wu of Jin’s reign.[8] As completely independent members, Wei, Shu and Wu each hold its own special history, celebrities and legends that are parallel and also mutually influential. As one of “The Twenty-four Histories”, the 24 greatest historical books, *Records of the Three Kingdoms* objectively keeps recording of all these great people and events, usually narrated from three perspectives in accordance with their processing and displaying in those three kingdoms. It’s no doubt that to understand the culture of the Three Kingdoms Period, Chen Shou and the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* would be the most suitable choice.

Nowadays, there are so many ways to display the culture of the Three Kingdoms, people keep talking about it now and then, not limited within China; they are displayed in books, sculptures, paintings, musics, videos and even computer games etc. However, with the data coming after checking the present understandings and impressions for these great characters and events related with the Three Kingdoms culture, they would disagree with what appears in the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* more or less. For example, the widely-popular images of the great intellectual master Zhuge Liang and the strong and loyal warrior Guan Yu just carry with them the positive characters, and they are almost treated as gods in the folk culture in China. However, both would make mistakes and hold shortcomings as they are recorded in the historical books. These images showing obvious artistic embellishment would match more with those in Luo Guanzhong’s *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

*Romance of the Three Kingdoms* could be called a historical novel, the characters and events inside go in accordance with the real ones in real history, however, the central word is still “novel”. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle says that “It is not the function for the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen--what is possible according to the the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse of in prose”. [9] It’s the truth that while the poets are talking about things probably to happen in the future, the historians are describing things that already took place before. “Poet” here doesn’t narrowly refer to those who create poems or verses but the ones who write out different literary works, usually with artistic features. The novel-writers make use of all techniques such as exaggeration, suspense and coincidence to lend the traditional images a more vivid and fashionable touch that would make them meet with the requirement of the times and not possibly be left out. The historical book is based on the facts and displays an objective view toward the concerned culture. The historical novel goes on with the assistance of the author’s application of imagination and decoration with artistic techniques. Historic books talk about
what has happened, which is usually not directly connected with the readers for they are in different times. Thus, it’s natural for modern people to give up those historical books and pick up the historical novels. In fact, when images and events in historical books are transplanted into the novels, they keep their originally essential points unchanged and also permit the changes agreeing with the time and tide, thus it is a process of cultural reconstruction.

Then, even in its native country, the historical book *Records of the Three Kingdoms* is not so popular as the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, it’s reasonable to judge that the same situation would more possibly appear when foreign cultures are concerned. Up till now, there’s no complete translated version of *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, but there are at least three officially acknowledged complete English versions for *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*: the one by Moss Roberts, by C.H. Brewitt-Taylor and by Yu Sumei; there are even more English versions for translating the episodes or stories inside.[10]With more and more people interested in Chinese culture, the images, characters and events in classical works become more and more famous, and it holds even truer for those from the Three Kingdoms Period.

Although it is an obvious fact that translating historic books would help get more accurate information about the original culture, following the preference of the readers would unconsciously set up a communication bridge between those originally different cultures, helping them learn to compromise with each other instead of abandoning the ones in an inferior status. No one knows what will happen next moment and the whole world is actually a community with a shared future, each member inside would have deep influence on the others and all these would surely lead to different effects. During the process of choosing the communicative and translating objects, with translation and adjustment to make them more understandable for the people from different cultures, the changes would surely take place and all would again go to the process of cultural reconstruction and usually a well-intended, positive one, which is really an exciting and inspiring events for the development of culture.

5 Conclusion

For a culture, changes and adjustment are necessary factors to help it remain in the world without losing its essential points and values, and renovate itself to meet with the new requirements of the times and tide, which is actually a very profound and meaningful process of cultural reconstruction. Whether the reconstruction would go to a better state is primarily determined by its own essential value and others’ understanding degree of the original culture. Thus, cultural reconstruction is the evolutionary consequence of the original culture, meanwhile, it will promote the understanding as well as development of the original culture. Then how to keep the original culture in a good stage and get it better understood by others is an essential issue. No culture could keep itself in a static state without communication with the outside world in the fast developing age full of pressures. Living in isolation means been left out eventually. Culture is formed with the efforts and consideration of groups of people. The premise for developing a culture should be the solid foundation established by the shared and com-
mon efforts of all concerned people. Even though it is a complex world, joining in it with the ability to communicate with others well would give one more chance to learn about it better. Not to say people growing up under different cultures, even when they are from the same places and born almost in the same years, they need someone to help them understand another culture, especially a foreign culture. These communications would necessarily need the help of translators. Then the translators should show the effects of their working with carefully choosing the targeted objects, for which classical literary works would be a quite responsible one to take on the heavy burden and offer a very efficient way to solve the problem because literature is the best carrier of culture. And when it goes to make choices between numerous literary works, the chosen ones to straighten the understanding of a culture would show surely different effects for they are together with different styles, for example, fictions and non-fictions. However, no matter how different effects they lead to, translating literary works for people who want to know more about a culture will greatly help promote its understanding and development and begin a good circulation of cultural development and reconstruction.

Acknowledgement

As achievement of the projects “The Study on Chen Shou and Culture of the Three Kingdoms in Chinese and English Countries”(QYYJC2005) supported by Center for Regional Cultural Studies of Si Chuan Province Social Science Key Research Base; “The Research on the Reconstruction of Chinese Traditional Culture in Network Literature”(WLWX-2020001) supported by Si Chuan Network Culture Research Center.

References
