

# Foreignization and Domestication in Chinese Translation of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in the Perspective of Cross-cultural Communication

Jun Shen

School of Foreign Languages  
Zhongzhou University  
Zhengzhou, China  
E-mail: shenjunzhzhu@163.com

**Abstract**—African American writer Toni Morrison has entered into the research scope of Chinese literary scholars for years, and Chinese version of her novels has been emerged one after another. This paper explores foreignizing and domesticating strategies employed in translating process and explains the role they have played in cross-cultural communication, expounding that cultural heterogeneity should be preserved in translating and Chinese translators need to get themselves visible in constructing Chinese cultural discourse.

**Keywords**—cross-cultural communication; foreignization; domestication; discourse

## I. INTRODUCTION

1993 literary Nobel prize laureate, Toni Morrison, has won great reputation from the whole world with her novels “characterized by visionary force and poetic import”. In China, literary scholars have published a large number of critical essays ranging from early introduction in the 1990s to later systematic research in the new century. If one searches “Toni Morrison” on CNKI.net, an online academic information sharing platform in China, the number of retrieved essays reaches over 3,000. Chinese enthusiasm for Morrison owes a great deal to the efforts of translators, who during less than 30 years have turned all her novels into Chinese language. Some of them have more than one version. Morrison's latest novel *Home*, English version coming out in 2012, has already been translated and published in Chinese in 2015. According to a study conducted in the perspective of Morrison's acceptance in China, the novel *Beloved* accounts for a large proportion of Chinese research. Its theme, narration, African tradition are common arguments for Chinese literary scholars. As for translation, the novel has its Chinese translation published by Wang Youxuan in as early as 1990, but a popular version coming out in 1996 and republished in 2006 by Pan Yue and Lei Ge is on sale at present in China. Although Chinese versions have helped the acceptance of the novel, scholars seem not quite enthusiastic about the translating process research and the role translators play in constructing Chinese literary discourse. This paper intends to contribute a little, if any, in these respects.

## II. DEFERRING OF SIGNIFIERS

In Saussurean linguistics, linguistic sign is seen as “two-sided psychological entity”: signified and signifier. They are in arbitrary but linear relation. That argument constitutes the foundation of comparative study in linguistic and literature. When it comes to literary translation, comparative research in traditional translation studies between source text (hereinafter referred to as ST) and target text (hereinafter referred to as TT) like “fidelity” and “equivalence” has accounted for a large proportion. Two well-known arguments in translation - Eugene Nida's “dynamic equivalence” in the west and Yan Fu's “faithfulness, smoothness and elegance” principle in China - both base themselves on that dichotomy of signifier and signified, TT and ST.

Based on linguistic paradigm likewise, Chinese linguistic scholar Zhu Heng divides translation into three types [1]: signified-oriented, signified and signifier balanced, and signifier-oriented. The first type refers to texts used for providing information, which is easiest to translate. The second one is used for spreading thoughts with defining “concept” being its focus, and the third for literary works. He holds that the third type translation should intentionally prolong the time duration readers spend enjoying text and purposely lengthen the distance between the signifier and the signified. His division pushes traditional dichotomy forward and provides potential for varying translation principles for different texts.

French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida opened a new epistemological paradigm in translation by deconstructing dichotomy of ST and TT like what he did to signifier and signified, suggesting that “difference is never pure, no more so in translation....we will never have, and in fact have never had, to do with some ‘transport’ of pure signified from one language to another” [2]. What he means here is equivalence of ST and TT is impossible because even meanings in ST are in constant motion. It is reasonable that Derrida harbors such notions on translation since he unswervingly elaborates his deconstructive philosophy that a signifier rather than reflecting the signified is in a constant “deferring” state

instead of pointing to the signified linearly. As no fixed signified can be obtained, equivalence in translation is unlikely. According to Derrida, we can deduce that ST and TT are not in a stably derivative relation but mutually dependent and dynamically interactive. J.S. Holmes approves of Derrida's deconstructive argument, believing it is helpful in understanding literary texts with ambiguity and uncertainty [3].

Morrison no doubt prefers uncertainty when writing *Beloved*. The mysterious description with Gothic style defers readers' interpretation, leading them to uncertainty and mystery. Morrison's language has both poetic style inherited from western tradition and the African tradition, so signifiers in ST itself are "playing" between two cultural discourses. The "spite", "noise" and "quietness" in "124", the "black forest", the "red gum" mentioned in the novel all have their own associative meaning in English and Chinese context as well as in African tradition. For instance, the sequence 1 2 4 that misses the third figure, signifies the absence of Sethe's third child: Sethe has four children, Howard, Buglar, the little killed baby, and Denver. *Beloved* has been excluded from the family. Mariangela Palladino interpreted the left "three" in theological way:

The correspondence of *Beloved* with the number three and its Christian heritage is not accidental: suggesting the Trinity, the number three signifies the idea of Oneness in which more entities perfectly coexist; it is the figure of perfection where the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are One and Three. Hence, as I suggest, *Beloved*'s presence in the novel corresponds to the three parts of the One, the Trinity. Being a Christ, she is one of three and, at the same time, One. [4]

Since ST is so ambiguity-based, it is harder for translators to obtain equivalent in TT, not mention to trigger the same theological association in Chinese context. The character *Beloved* in the novel is another example. Many literary scholars have attempted to analyze *Beloved*'s identity reaching varying conclusions including the incarnated daughter, collective memory of the black and a sexually abused slave, etc. when it comes to translation of the name *Beloved*, Wang Youxian translated it into "Jiaony" in Chinese and Pan and Lei took "Chonger" as its Chinese equivalent. Therefore, the novel's translation to a certain extent is the "transport" in Derrida's word, which indicates transformation surely occurs with changes in meaning.

In fact, what post-modern literature requires and Derrida's suggests is a new view on the relationship between ST and TT. Static TT-ST relation needs to give way to a dynamic and interactive one in postmodern context.

Derrida, however, seems not go so far in his later works as to suggest absolute impossibility of "transporting" one language into another. He just emphasizes the fact that it is not possible to obtain a certain TT since ST is in a dynamic state. That argument, if the danger of untranslatability has been avoided, provides for translators who favor domestication another excuse in addition to the traditional "fluency".

### III. TRANSLATOR'S VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY

When mentioning translation strategies, people naturally refer to literal (word for word) or free (sense for sense) translation. For instance, in as early as the three kingdoms period in China (220-280), Zhi Qian, when translating Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit to Chinese, pointed out sense translation is very important and pronunciation in Sanskrit should be not be retained [5]. In the west, Cicero and Jerome are widely considered origin of sense for sense or word for word translation. The former places emphasis on sense in language instead of word for word equivalence, while the latter believes God's will must not be distorted by any translator's subjective transformation. Such arguments had continued until German hermeneutic scholar Friedrich Schleiermacher put forward foreignizing and domesticating methods. From then on, foreignization and domestication have been widely referred to and naturally considered as the focus of debate. It seems that domestication with its produced "fluency" has gained upper hand in history.

Based on Schleiermacher's division, Lawrence Venuti conducted a reinterpretation of foreignization, arguing that literal or "word for word" translation has been misread in the history of translation and that heterogeneity in ST should be preserved in translating through the application of that strategy [6]. He focused on heterogeneous elements in translating and agreed with Schleiermacher's view "to bring target text readers to a foreign land". For a long time, what Venuti termed as "transparent translation" has been worshiped in the western literary field. Publishers, critics and readers have all favored "fluent" translation and seen "fluency" as a crucial norm of translation in quality assessment. Consequently, domestication becomes a standard way in translating. While readers feel as if they are reading a native language text instead of a translated one, translators become invisible.

Inspired by deconstructionism and post-colonialism, Venuti applies cultural theories to translation studies, and forms his own foreignizing-oriented view that translators should be visible in TT with literary tension produced by application of foreignizing strategy and preserving heterogeneous elements in ST.

Translation is a process that involves looking for similarities between languages and cultures – particularly similar messages and formal techniques – but it does this only because it is constantly confronting dissimilarities. It can never and should never aim to remove these dissimilarities entirely. A translated text should be the site where a different culture emerges. [7]

Although Venuti's "word for word" foreignization occurs between Indo-European languages and English-Chinese translation is quite another case, his advocacy has been echoed by some Chinese scholars like Qiu Maoru, who discussed translatability and zero translation in his essay, pointing out zero translation is key in preserving heterogeneity between two different cultures [8]. In short, Translation researchers and practitioners in China have as well noticed domestication is not the whole story in

translation and foreignizing can give translators and TT readers a new field to explore.

When it comes to the Pan and Lei's translated *Beloved*, domestication is undoubtedly indispensable in translating. After all, translators are conducting bilingual transformation facing Chinese and English language with quite different linguistic structures. Domestication at micro-linguistic level therefore is understandable for understanding end. However, most of the time, translators conform to ST, endeavoring to apply shift as little as possible and preserve literariness as much as possible. In this way, the mysterious and supernatural elements retained, though readers' fully understanding might be put off again and again. For instance, there is a chapter in the novel without any punctuation, which is used by the character Beloved to narrate her psychology. ST is a typically signifier-oriented with varying interpretation. TT does not use any punctuation either, which seems not to be a convention in Chinese literature, but like "stream of consciousness" widely known in Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. That classic narrative technique in western tradition is naturally enjoyed by Chinese readers in the TT reading process, though the process may be unpleasant to some beginners of western literature. The fragmentation and uncertainty the foreignized translation brings to some extent do echo the literariness of the Russian formalism which advocates that the literariness is the essence of literature.

Another example is the description of the haunted house 124 whose red light and weird atmosphere are transformed without any domestication to Chinese culture equivalents. Paul D. "whipping the table around" drives the baby ghost out of 124, and later Beloved does the same thing on Paul D. TT readers may clearly feel that the African style incarnation is quite different from a Chinese one though in Chinese legends incarnation does widely exist. Even in discourse relevant to the ghost, Chinese narration is generally more certain than its African counterpart. To retain uncertainty and heterogeneity makes TT readers keep wondering the writer's intention and get plot advancing in an interactive way. It is worth to note that foreignizing translation does not in practice harm the so called "equivalence". It rather seems to echo in a reverse direction what Nida suggested "dynamic equivalence" in stylistic respect. Of course, puns in names like Sixo, Paid etc. in the novel with little translatability have to be handled in other ways like employing notes.

Some scholars cautious of western influence might worry about the intrusion of heterogeneity in western literature. It is not necessary because what TT retains is African tradition Morrison intended to emphasize rather than the dominant Anglo-white culture she used as background

In short, in global village context, how to preserve heterogeneity in cultural communication without setting too much impediment for understanding is a problem translators have to attend to in translation.

It is understandable that different translation practitioners practice foreignization and domestication to different degree, because they take different theories as their preferred guidance. Debates in both western and Chinese history occurred frequently, such as disagreement between John

Dryden and Ben Jonson, Matthew Arnold and Francis. W. Newman in British history, as well as well-known arguments between Yan Fu and Liang Qichao, Lu Xun and Zhao Jingshen in China, to mention just a few. Anyhow, with the translation studies turning to "culture", the notion that translators should come from behind and play their visible and due role in cross-cultural communication is increasingly accepted by translation researchers and practitioners in the whole world.

#### IV. CONSTRUCTION OF TRANSLATED CULTURAL DISCOURSE

Novel prize winner Octavio Paz argues that no text is pure original because language itself is a translation [9]. He means language is a translation of non-language field and each word or phrase is actually translation of another. Morrison has claimed her *Beloved* is inspired by a book she had edited. Sethe in *Beloved* has an archetype called Margret Garner in that book. In a broad sense, Morrison "translated" that book, and Chinese translators translated Morrison. This paper has no intention to assess Chinese translation of *Beloved*, since it is quite natural that some TTs are considered better than their ST in literary translation whereas some are not. Whether TT is favored depends on readers' attitudes toward translator's Creation of or treason against ST. Creation is translator's attempt to reinterpret ST. It is worth to note that such reinterpretation could occur unconsciously. A translator, for example, sometimes cannot help automatically correcting intentionally arranged spelling or grammatical mistakes in ST. And Treason is translator's intentional betrayal to ST to fulfill his subjective end. In practice, it is difficult to separate one from another. They are an organic unity. Translation is creative treason [10]. In that sense, TT is the extension to and development of ST and ST's connotation might be enriched in the process of translation.

Morrison employed English to interpret Africa America culture, which is a transformation from black discourse to a white one. Yet Morrison's readers are mainly Anglo-whites in the western world. The preservation of black heterogeneity in the white text itself is foreignization. When Chinese translators shift that white text with black element into Chinese, it is significant for them to consider what role the Chinese context plays in translating and what identity their translated discourse enjoys.

Many thinkers in the west for a long time have seen China as an other, believing China has a completely different culture from theirs. If that other is used for cultural introspection and improvement, it is a good application. However, if cultural difference is pushed to cultural incommensurability, then cultural relativism is likely to be advocated by people who harbor such an idea. Just as the value of untranslatability can only be discussed in pure research because the practical demand nowadays has invalidated it in applied field, cultural incommensurability seems meaningless in a global village context with so frequent cultural communication. In practice, translation of *Beloved* requires a communication between western culture, African culture and Chinese culture. In post-modern context,

subjectivity could be formed in that kind of communication. TT *Beloved* actually has three discourse field, and the translators' task is to construct a Chinese discourse while preserving heterogeneity in the African and western culture.

On the one hand, ST in English language exerts great influence over TT, like the "stream consciousness" in the western modern tradition which has already been familiar to experienced Chinese readers; on the other hand, TT can be helpful for reinterpretation and acceptance of ST. While *Beloved* with its unique features penetrates into Chinese culture, it is not fair to say Chinese medio-transtology has no influence over the novel's reinterpretation and Morrison's acceptance in America and even the whole world. Those western elements and the African culture reflected in ST could be absorbed into TT and thus become part of Chinese discourse which then should not be totally considered as foreign. Therefore, *Beloved's* translating is actually an interactive process between three different discourses. Each affects and is affected by others. By domestication, foreign elements may become native, but they cannot be felt and enjoyed by native readers. By foreignization, foreign elements can also be absorbed and thus make up a part of native cultural discourse though readers may not adapt to such things in the beginning. As far as translators are concerned, they should play a role as not a passive midwife but an active native discourse contributor to a native discourse with some foreignness.

For a long time, Chinese literary translation has been devalued and translated literature can get a legal identity in neither source or target discourse. Many people believe translators are just transforming the information from one language to another and people are not able to discover the value in translated literature; neither do they admit contributions made by translators. Nida expressed the following complaints:

The translator's task is essentially a difficult and often a thankless one. He is severely criticized if he makes a mistake, but only faintly praised when he succeed, for often it is assumed that anyone who knows two language ought to be able to do as well as the translator who has labored to produce a text [11].

As a matter of fact, many master pieces like epics written by Homer, Hebrew Bible, and Greek dramas have owed their passing on to translation. Without translator's efforts, it is impossible for those classics to survive in the long history. The learning of cultural heterogeneity in TT is no doubt helpful for readers in their cultural communication in their lives since that occurs frequently in the context of global village. Nowadays, translated literature has actually played an important role in learning foreign cultures and forming a new cultural discourse in China. Translated literature should enjoy a legal identity as part of Chinese literature which is open not only to homogenous but also heterogeneous elements in the western culture as well as that of minority ethnic group.

## V. CONCLUSION

No text, ST or TT, is simply a semantic combination of its constituent words. Its interpretation will surely be conducted by readers in their own cultural context. *Beloved* is no exception. With so many post-modern uncertainties in ST, it is understandable and convenient for a translator to employ foreignizing translation strategy to keep TT open to varying interpretation. As a matter of fact, ST and TT are in an interactive relation. The interaction is both synchronic and diachronic. Synchronically, ST could have different TTs – *Beloved* has two unabridged Chinese TTs and several abridged TTs - which in turn may affect ST's interpretation and acceptance in ST culture. Diachronically, a TT favored in one period of time may be criticized by readers decades later and vice versa. Translation occurs between two different cultures which to a certain extent controls the whole process of translation, and translators in turn also contribute to the construction of their national cultural discourse which necessarily includes the heterogeneity absorbed from the ST culture. In the global village context, a closed culture confined to its own tradition apparently sees no promising prospects. The concern about cultural imperialism is of course reasonable, which is Venuti's academic focus in his *The Translator's Invisibility*, but it should not be taken as an excuse for self-enclosure in the cross-cultural communication.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Zhu Heng, "Linguistic Dimension as a Determinant of the Limits and the Standards of Translation" *Chinese Translation Journal*, vol.36, 2015(2), p.5.
- [2] Jacques, Derrida, *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. p.4
- [3] Basil Hadim, *Teaching and Researching Translation*, Pearson Education limited, 2001. p.50.
- [4] Mariangela Palladino, "History, Postcolonialism and Postmodernism in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" in *Neither East nor West*. Edited by Kerstin W. Shands, 2008, p.57.
- [5] Xie Tianzhen, *A Brief History of Translation in China and the West*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2009, p. 52.
- [6] Liu Junping, *A General History of Western Translation Theory*, Wu Han: Wuhan University Press, 2009, p. 85.
- [7] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2004, p. 306.
- [8] Qiu Maoru, "Translatability and Zero Translation", *Chinese Translation Journal*, vol. 22, 2001(1), pp. 24-27.
- [9] Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. 2010, p.x.
- [10] Xie Tianzhen, *Medio-transtology*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 1999, p.137.
- [11] Eugene Nida, *Toward a Science of Translation*, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. 2004, p.155