

**A Study of Translation of Chinese Four-character Idioms in  
*Selected Modern Chinese Essays: Domestication and  
Foreignization***

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**Abstract**

As two effective strategies, domestication and foreignization have served as well-known translating ways. As we all know that idioms are widely used in essays, this paper mainly discusses the significance of idiom translation studies and also analyses the two translation strategies - domestication and foreignization by their definitions. To explore how domestication and foreignization are applied to idiom translation in *Selected Modern Chinese Essays* rendered into English by Zhang Peiji, this paper selects some examples and analyses them to prove the feasibility of these two strategies. Finally, it comes to the conclusion that domestication and foreignization can be used flexibly to achieve appropriate translations.

**Keywords:** domestication, foreignization, four-character idiom translation, *Selected Modern Chinese Essays*

**1、 Introduction**

As we all know, essays have been an important genre for thousands of years. The essay mainly describes the facts and true life which the writer has experienced and also expresses the writer's thoughts and attitude. In China, essays are regarded as the essence of Chinese literature and also a carrier of Chinese culture. Modern Chinese essays are highly worth

studying and translating. In modern essay translation, Zhang Peiji has made a big contribution and had an important influence. Among all his works, his series of *Selected Modern Chinese Essays* need be mentioned, because it collects more than one hundred pieces of modern Chinese essays and corresponding English translations which spread traditional Chinese thought and culture to foreign countries. It can not be ignored that all of English translations of essays in this book are so smooth, beautiful and idiomatic. From the perspective of idiomatic translation, nobody will deny the fact that idioms are a really important and indispensable part in essays, and also it is obviously found that there are so many Chinese idioms in *Selected Modern Chinese Essays*. So more importantly, how to translate these idioms into English is worth further studying. Therefore, this paper will focus on the translation of Chinese idioms in the essays.

## **2、 Chinese four-character idioms and their translation**

Idiom, a very particular linguistic unit, is characterized by its fixed structure and pattern. As a conventional and special language form, it carries both traditional culture and profound significance. Regarded as an important component of language and culture, it is used by Chinese people for a long time. Its accurate expressions on social phenomena are presented with its vivid words. The meanings of these vivid words are not just a combination of individual words in the idiom but must be the whole meaning of the structure. This feature can be called semantic unity or structural stability of idioms. So when translating Chinese idioms into English, translators should not only pay attention to the linguistic meanings but also cultural connotations. As it is said by Mona Baker: "The main problems that idiomatic and fixed expressions pose in translation relate to two main areas: The ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly; and the difficulties involved in rendering the various aspects of meaning that an idiom or a fixed expression conveys into the target language" (2000: 65). Translation of Chinese idioms is a really difficult work. Cultural differences are a barrier to translators in Chinese-English idiom translation. The cultural differences may relate to some aspects, for instance: living environment, custom, history, religion, politics, economy and so on. According to these, to achieve a correct translation of Chinese idiom, the translator must

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learn the original meaning of idiom and know what kind of culture-related stories are behind them.

### **3、 The Exploration of Domestication and Foreignization**

In the book *The Translator's Invisibility* published in 1995, Lawrence Venuti, an American translation theorist, pointed out: "There are only two. Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him." (Venuti, 1995:37)

These two ways of translating are called foreignization and domestication. Domestication is the way that makes foreign culture close to the target culture reader; on the other hand, foreignization is the way that takes the reader over to foreign culture. In other words, domestication overcomes linguistic and cultural barriers to make translation suitable for target readers; while foreignization remains the foreignness of source text and culture.

#### **3.1 Definition of domestication**

Schuttleworth and Cowie (1997) define the term of domestication in this way: "A term used by Venuti to describe the translation strategy in which a transparent, fluent style is adopted in order to minimize the strangeness of the foreign text for TL readers." It is well known that many translators are in favor of the strategy of domestication. First, these translators must overcome language barriers to make their translations in a more fluent and natural way, so that target readers could feel like reading an original text. Second, another essential factor in domestication is culture. When carrying on translating, translators must take cultural differences into consideration. They should try hard to transfer the source language culture into the target language culture by eliminating cultural barriers in order to make the target reader easily perceive the information of the translated text from their own cultural perspective. According to this, domestication can promote the cultural norms and conventions of the target culture.

#### **3.2 Definition of foreignization**

Foreignization which was put forward by Venuti, is in contrast to the domestication. It is acknowledged that translation should provide communication to foreign language and culture so that it takes responsibility to show something different and introduce something new, but actually sometimes some of information conveyed through translation becomes limited or even disappears. Therefore, Venuti suggested a strategy - foreignization. This strategy respects the difference in the source language, and it also enables the target reader to enjoy an alien reading experience. In addition, foreignization has a very strong emphasis on the identities of the source language and maintains them from the ideological dominance of the target culture. That is to say, foreignization is an important way to resist cultural hegemony. As a result, foreignization is pushed to a higher position with its political significance.

When translating with foreignization strategy, the translator should be confident that their target readers have the ability to understand foreign culture. It is also the main goal of foreignization to bring the foreign language and culture to target readers so that people from different countries may have a better understanding of each other.

#### **4 、 Application of Domestication and Foreignization in Translating Chinese four-character idioms in *Selected Modern Chinese Essays***

##### **4.1 Application of Domestication in Translating Chinese four-character idioms in *Selected Modern Chinese Essays***

By minimizing linguistic and cultural foreignness, domestication can facilitate cross-cultural communication. On account of domestication, target readers can perceive the translated text easily. In *Selected Modern Chinese Essays*, there are many cases that call for domestication. Some examples translated with domestication are as follows.

(1) “真正的朋友，恐怕要算‘总角之交’或‘竹马之交’了。” (Zhang, 2007:31)

“Real friendship between two persons originates perhaps **from the time of life when they were children playing innocently together.**” (Zhang, 2007:34)

This example is taken from Mid-life Loneliness of Xia Mianzun. The illustrated sentence in Chinese contains two four-character idioms: “总角之交” and “竹马之交”. These two

four-character forms are typical fixed Chinese patterns which are widely used in Chinese essays. In these expressions, there are three images - horn, bamboo and horse. If Zhang directly translated them literally into English, English people can not have a right and deep understanding of their true meanings. As we all know, in ancient China, young kids had hair style like horn and they often played together riding on bamboo-sticks which were regarded as horses. As time goes by, Chinese people use these four-character idioms to show their close friendship with each other from childhood to adulthood. These idioms which carry Chinese history and culture are full of meanings so that Zhang translated it by the method of domestication. All of four-character idioms in the source language are domesticated in the target language. Obviously, Zhang expressed the meanings of each four-character idioms in the target language vividly, faithfully and naturally.

(2) “就让我当一个“始作俑者”吧！” (Zhang, 2007:243)

“Therefore, let me be reconciled to being saddled with the epithet of ‘originator of a bad practice’.” (Zhang, 2007:245)

This sentence is taken from On the Futility of Literary Criticism of Ji Xianlin. “始作俑者” firstly occurred in this archaism: “仲尼曰：‘始作俑者，其无后乎’”。 At that time, in ancient China, “俑” means man-made figures of men or women buried with dead persons. So the Chinese idiom “始作俑者” refers to the person who is the first one to have some bad practice. In the source text, the writer wanted to express the figurative meaning of “始作俑者”. Therefore, the translator dealt it with domestication - “originator of a bad practice”, for the target reader may have a big obstacle to understanding the source language and culture.

(3) “又有一些位，.....，便撇在一旁视如敝屣，.....。” (Zhang, 2007:223)

“Some, ... . They cast away whatever subjects they dislike like something utterly worthless. ... .” (Zhang, 2007:226)

This example is taken from Learning and Personal Inclination of Liang Shiqiu. It also contains one four-character idiom - “视如敝屣” which means regarding something as worn-out shoes. Zhang prefers the domesticated translation “cast away ... like something utterly worthless” to “cast away...like a pair of worn-out shoes”. For English people, here, worn-out shoes in terms of something of no use or value are not easy to be understood and

perceived. And also they maybe have no idea of the real purpose regarding something as worn-out shoes. So Zhang did not keep the original words - worn-out shoes in his translation, instead, and he translated it by paraphrasing. That is also a kind of domestication.

(4) “巷，是 ..... ；是城市喧嚣扰攘中的一带洞天幽境，..... 。”(Zhang, 2007:269)

“The lane is .... It is a **heavenly abode** in the midst of confusion. ... .” (Zhang, 2007:272)

The above sentence comes from *The Lane* which is written by Ke Ling. “洞天” first appeared in Taoism to describe a fascinating place. It always refers to a supernatural place in which the immortal lives. However, most English people are not familiar with Taoism, while they have a strong belief in Christianity. On account of this, Zhang translated “洞天” into “heaven” which completely expresses the proper meaning. Here, by domestication, Zhang tries hard to transfer the source language culture into the target language culture by eliminating cultural barriers so that the target reader can easily perceive the information from their own cultural perspective.

#### 4.2 Application of Foreignization in Translating Chinese four-character idioms in *Selected Modern Chinese Essays*

Foreignization is widely used when there are no equivalent phrases to be found in the target language. The translator employs foreignization to retain original culture and enrich target language culture. At the same time, applying foreignization is the way to introduce excellent essays to foreign readers. The following are some examples.

(1) “其实，.....，《尚书· 牧誓》里就有 “牝鸡无晨” 之句。”(Zhang, 2007:284)

“As a matter of fact, ... , as witness the Chinese idiom ‘**No hen crows at dawn**’ (meaning ‘No woman is to usurp man’s power’) in *The Book of History: Mu Shi*.” (Zhang, 2007:286)

This example comes from *Egg-laying, Cackling, Etc.* “牝鸡无晨” is a classical Chinese idiom which originates from an old saying. It refers to that no woman usurps man's power. But here, the translator foreignizes it into “No hen crows at dawn” to keep original Chinese figures - hen and dawn. This translation was done with foreignization in order to maintain traditional

Chinese characteristics and promote cultural transmission.

(2) “——这自然是书生之见，不免通达的人一笑。” (Zhang, 2007:39)

“All this is undoubtedly **the pedantic view of a bookish person** - a view which must sound ridiculous to all sensible gentlemen.”(Zhang, 2007:42)

“书生之见” is taken from I Took a Wooden Boat. This idiom mainly talks about some person who is full of bookishness often has impractical views. The significant figure in this idiom is “书生” denoting a special group of people in ancient China. The translator directly transplants it into target culture with the expression “the pedantic view of a bookish person”. With foreignization, it has a very strong emphasis on the identities of the source language and culture.

(3) “……，约几位朋友来看看，更有秉烛夜游的神气——昙花总在夜里放蕊。” (Zhang, 2007:145)

“... , we will invite some friends to visit us in the evening to feast their eyes on them - in an atmosphere smacking of **nocturnal merry-making under candle lights**.” (Zhang, 2007:147)

“秉烛夜游” is an idiom in Lao She’s *On Growing Flowers* which means that people can enjoy a happy life and make merry in nighttime. It is also a kind of traditional Chinese convention in old time. Since it carries Chinese history and classic culture, the translator made it into “nocturnal merry-making under candle lights” by foreignizing. In this way, he gave certain respect on the source language culture.

(4) “……，无边无垠，坦荡如砥，……。” (Zhang, 2007:150)

“The boundless highland ... , is **flat like a whetstone**. ... .” (Zhang, 2007:153)

“坦荡如砥” originates from an old Chinese saying: “周道如砥，其直如矢”. In old time, “砥” is a kind of knife stone which is smooth, flat and straight. So Chinese people use its metaphorical meaning to modify highlands. In this way, the translator directly translated “坦荡如砥” by its figurative meaning “flat like a whetstone”. We can say this is also a case rendered by means of foreignization to keep Chinese language features.

## Conclusion

This paper aims at discussing two major translation strategies - domestication and foreignization. Employment of domestication makes the original text much closer to the target reader by overcoming linguistic and cultural differences. While application of foreignization brings the target reader to the original text in order to keep the original linguistic and cultural features.

On the basis of theoretical study and case analysis of Zhang's translation, we can conclude that in translation of essays domestication and foreignization are both important. They are two complementary ways for translation. On one hand, Chinese is quite different from English; there are some unique expressions and phrases in Chinese that must be translated into English by means of domestication so that they may be well understood. Chinese four-character idioms which constitute social phenomena are translated into English by means of domestication, for they have no corresponding counterparts in English. Zhang's translated works are intended to be read mainly by English readers, and in fact by means of domestication the essays are presented naturally and smoothly. On the other hand, promoting cross-cultural exchanges between different countries is another goal of translation, so it is necessary to retain peculiar foreign cultural elements by means of foreignization. In a word, the comprehensive application of these two strategies can achieve better translations.

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