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LT2321 DEC Term Paper

Translating Cultural Specific Items in Traditional Chinese Folk Tale

The folktale I would like to share is the tale about the origin of Chinese New Year. Legend says that there was a ferocious beast that appears at the village every **New Year's** Eve. The beast destroys the village and feeds on the villagers. The villagers were no match for the beast. One day when the villagers gather to discuss about how to chase the beast away, an old man arrives at the village. The **old man** told the villagers that the beast is called **Nian**, it is terrified of the colour **red** and loud blasting sound. He advised the villagers to decorate the village with red papers and lanterns. He also suggested that they dress up in red clothes and set some **bamboo** on fire to release cracking sound. The next time Nian came, the villagers decorated their house with red decorations, wore red clothes and then lit up bamboo to make loud cracking sound. Blinded by the colour red and blasted by loud cracking sound, Nian panicked, it was terrified. It escaped back to where it came from. The villagers successfully defeated Nian. That year, the villagers were safe from harm and danger. Every year after, the villagers repeat the same ritual and eventually it became a tradition of New Year for red decorations to be put up and firecrackers to be lit.

From the tale above, I identified 5 cultural specific items and concepts that might be difficult to translate. Certain items will be analysed in detail and the others will be briefly mentioned. First, New Year is perceived differently across the world. For instance, Chinese refers New Year's Day to the first day of the lunar calendar while in Japan, New Year's Day is usually referred to the 1st of January, the first day of the year in Gregorian Calendar. To overcome, I will use extratextual gloss to add a footnote and emphasize that the New Year mentioned in the tale should be based on the lunar calendar.

Next, bamboo was used in the tale presumably due to its widespreadness in Chinese culture. Bamboo plays an important role in the daily lives of Chinese by providing the raw material for constructions, stationaries and many more. “The overall image of bamboo is a generic representation of the morality of the educated class. Bamboo’s height symbolises high morality while the hollowness illustrates the humbleness of scholars.” (Su, 2013) Therefore, bamboo also earned itself the reputation of being the ‘gentlemen’ among plants. Canvan et. al (2016) shows bamboo is highly distributed across China, Brazil and Australia due to optimum growing climate. The assumption is that the more distributed the plant is the higher the popularity. Hence, while this representation of bamboo is appreciated by the Chinese, readers from Scandinavian culture might struggle to relate. My assumption is that this book is targeted at young readers, therefore, I will use the substitution strategy and apply the absolute universalism technique to translate ‘bamboo’ into ‘wood’ because bamboo played only a minor part in the tale. Wood also crackles when being burnt, although not as loud as bamboo, but easier to comprehend and relate for young readers.

Secondly, in Chinese culture, ‘old man’ is an underlying metaphor for knowledge and wisdom. An old man in a plot frequently plays the role of giving crucial advice, in a figure of old masters or others. In most of the Asian cultures such as Chinese and Korean culture, elders are usually respected. In China, children are obliged by law to be filial to their parents while in Korea, the elder’s 70th birthday is celebrated with big parties. In these culture for instance, an elder’s advice is often valued because they are more experienced in life. On the other hand, Eskimo culture would not share the same perception. In Eskimo, growing old could be challenging due to tough climatic conditions and scarce resources. Nursing an old person in such harsh conditions may be a burden. Thus, in these cases, an old man’s advice would not be noteworthy. In translating ‘old man’, the term must fulfil the criteria of ‘old’

and 'wise'. To overcome, my suggestion is to translate 'old man' into 'wise old man' because 'old man' alone is insufficient to represent 'wise' and 'knowledge'.

One of the aspects of the tale I think readers from another culture will overlook is the idea of red in Chinese culture. Red used in the tale is possibly the outcome of the Chinese belief about associating red with good fortune, happiness, and celebration (Yu, 2014). Red is often used when important life events are involved including weddings and birthdays. However, in Western culture for example, the connotation of red might be associated with status and dominance (Farrelly et al., 2013). Gnambs et al (2015) also suggested that red is associated with hazard and danger while Yu (2014) supported these statements by stating red as a symbol of blood and destruction. In general, English culture perceives red as a colour of blood which correlates to aggression. Some might even think that using red symbolises bad omen. It is rare to connect red to celebrations apart from Christmas when the colour is matched with green. To overcome, I would suggest using intratextual gloss, such as saying, "It became a tradition of Chinese New Year for red decorations which symbolizes fortune and good luck to be put up."

Finally, translating name can also be difficult. Nian is the name of the ferocious beast in the tale. Normally, names are transliterated but the instance might differ when the name carries a meaning. Nian means 'year' in Chinese and by defeating Nian, it symbolizes that all bad luck is defeated, the upcoming year will be smooth and blessed. For better understanding, I intend to italicise the word 'Nian' to indicate that it is a foreign word, using extratextual gloss and incorporate a footnote to explain to the target readers about its meaning.

In conclusion, the translation needs to be tailored to the target countries and their respective cultures. It is very difficult to produce a version of translation which could be universally understood by readers from all parts of the globe. Therefore, in translating,

different techniques need to be used to ensure readers are receptive of source culture while retaining the quality of the translation.

References

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