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A Comparative Analysis of Four English Versions of Animal Metaphors in Nicknames of Characters in Water Margin

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Abstract: This study examines the challenges of translating animal metaphors in character nicknames from the Chinese classic Water Margin into English. Such metaphors, which are central to character portrayal and cultural meaning, often struggle with semantic and cultural losses in translation. This study evaluates four English versions by Pearl S. Buck, Jackson J. H., Sidney Shapiro, and John and Alex Dent-Young and finds inconsistencies in strategies and results. Using the three-dimensional transformational framework of Eco-translatology, the study analyses the linguistic, cultural and communicative adaptations in 37 metaphors. Shapiro's translations show the most balanced approach across all dimensions, while others show omissions that diminish cultural resonance and communicative intent. This study uses comparative analysis to emphasize the need for culturally informed translation strategies that preserve metaphorical meaning and promote intercultural understanding. It also emphasizes the importance of translators as cultural mediators and calls for further research on the approaches to complex metaphorical constructs in order to improve the accuracy and cultural depth of literary translations.

Keywords: Animal Metaphors; Water Margin; Eco-Translatology; Translation Strategies; Cross-Cultural Communication

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1. Background

Water Margin is a 14th-century novel and one of the four masterpieces of classical Chinese literature. Written in vernacular Chinese, the story tells of how a group of 108 outlaws gathered at Liangshan Marsh to form a sizable army to rebel against bureaucracy and to exact justice in the final years of the Northern Song Dynasty. It is challenging to make readers remember these 108 distinct characters in the novel. Among them, 37 characters are named after animals as metaphors, for which readers can quickly get an intuitive impression of the main personalities and behavioral patterns of the characters. These metaphors are often closely related

to the heroic deeds or prominent personalities of the characters, leading readers to more easily associate with related characters and quickly outline their contours.

With rich language materials and profound cultural implication, Water Margin has played a very significant role in the development of Chinese literature and social changes, and occupies a unique position in the history of Chinese literature and even the history of social development. Nicknames of characters, containing abundant metaphorical culture, are a major feature of this novel and thus become one of the research hot spots. There are rich animal symbolic meanings in Chinese folk culture, which not only absorb and apply folk culture, but make literary works closer to the public's cognition and aesthetics, allowing readers to understand these characters in familiar cultural contexts and resonate with them. Animal metaphors in literary works can also imply the fate of characters or their role positioning in the story.

Animal is often used as metaphor to explain someone's appearance or behavior, indicating that the appearance or behavior of someone is not like human, but like animal. Animal metaphors are often used to express criticism, but the animal metaphors in Water Margin are exceptions (Alice, 2020)[1]. From the way of linguistic formation of nicknames in this novel, nicknames are generally formed through metaphor or metonymy: ground is mainly composed of animals, combining with tenor to form the metonymy; and metonymy is based on image, temperament or expertise, highlighting the salient features of tenor.

Translating metaphors in classical Chinese literary works is by no means an easy task. If the translators are unable to immerse into the cultures of both Chinese and English, it is difficult to fully express the rich Chinese cultural characteristics of the metaphors in the original text into another language. And if the semantic gaps and cultural omissions in the original and target languages cannot be properly resolved, it will inevitably lead to semantic misunderstandings and cultural misreading, and the cultural value of the original work will be lost. This study attempts to compare and analyze the translation of nicknames with animals as metaphors in Water Margin from the perspective of the transformation of the three dimensions of language, culture and communication in Eco-translatology, in order to find translation methods for metaphors with Chinese characteristics and promote cultural exchange between Chinese and English.

2. Literature review

Cheng and Wang (2023) compared four English translations of Water Margin from multiple perspectives such as vocabulary, syntax, and discourse structure, and found that Pearl's translation was fluent and natural in language, inclined towards authentic English expression, and focused on cultural interpretation; Jackson's translation is more conservative and leans towards literal translation, retaining the original text when dealing with cultural elements; Shapiro's translation strives for language balance, balancing the accuracy of literal translation and the fluency of free translation; the Yangs' translation is more modern and colloquial in language, with a focus on target language readers' acceptance when dealing with cultural elements[2].

Fan and Zhao (2024) pointed out that although Pearl's translation claims to use literal translation, it is actually mostly an "invisible domestication" strategy; Jackson's translation embodies the viewpoint of regulating the center with Western literary forms, which extensively cuts and rewrites the original text; Shapiro's translation is a combination of domestication and foreignization, free translation and literal translation, with some modifications to the original text; the Yangs' translation is domestication plus free translation strategy, with a cultural imperialist tendency[3].

Zhao (et al., 2024) compared the four translations in terms of character naming, handling of ancient allusions and slang, understanding of cultural background and values, language style, and pursuit of literary effects[4]. In terms of character naming, Jackson's translation retains transliterated names, Pearl's translation adds transliteration and meaning, and Shapiro's translation emphasizes character names; Yang's translation tends to explore the cultural connotations behind the names through free translation, in order to approach the understanding of Western readers. In terms of allusions and slang treatment, Jackson's translation is heavily annotated, Pearl's translation is simplified or replaced, Shapiro's translation is deleted, and Yang's translation mostly used domestication strategies to transform allusions and slang into familiar expressions for Western readers. Yangs' translation strategies make the translation smoother and more natural in line with the reading habits of Western readers, but these approaches also to some extent lose the cultural characteristics of the original allusions and slang.

The time span of the four English versions is long, so different historical periods have exerted numerous impact on translators' translation selections and strategies, which can be demonstrated by the great discrepancies in translating animal metaphors of some nicknames. For example, the four versions of "翻江蜃" are The Oyster That Turns the River over (Pearl), Whirling Conch Shell (Jackson), The River Churning Clam (Shapiro), and The River Rider (Youngs), which are strikingly different in tenors and vehicles. "蜃" refers to a mythical animal in Chinese legend like a dragon, so there are improper translations in the four versions in terms of culture with Chinese characteristics.

Pearl usually adopts literal translation in translating the animal metaphors of nicknames in order to convey the original Chinese culture to the West, but some literal translation caused cultural loss in metaphor translation, thus failing to realize the transformation of communicative dimension (Ren & Qu, 2022)[5]. Among 37 animal metaphors of nicknames translated by Youngs, 15 metaphors are missing tenors, which not only fails to realize the transformation of language dimensions, but also causes cultural losses. Jackson conforms to "communication mode" of Newmark, adopting the strategy of "domestication", focusing on "free translation", and thus leaving aside the metaphorical mode of the original text in most cases. Shapiro pays more attention to the reproduction of metaphor in the linguistic dimension and the expression of metaphorical meaning in the communicative dimension. However, transliteration is used in the metaphor translation of some nicknames, such as 玉麒麟 Jeweled Chinlin; 井木犴 Ching Mu Han, which not only loses the transformation of metaphor in the linguistic dimension, but also fails to realize the transformation of cultural and communicative dimensions.

The current research presents a rich and in-depth trend, comparing and analyzing the translation strategies of the four English translations of Water Margin from multiple dimensions, breaking through the limitations of traditional single-text analysis, making the research more objective, comprehensive, and systematic. The research perspectives have become increasingly diversified, covering a wide range of translation theory frameworks such as functionalist translation theory, semantic theory and teleology.

However, no one has analyzed the metaphorical translation in names of character from the perspective of Eco-translatology. The names of characters in Water Margin contain rich metaphors, which not only imply their personalities and destinies, but vividly reflect traditional Chinese culture. Starting from the three-dimensional transformation of Eco-translatology (language dimension, cultural dimension, and communicative dimension), this study explores how various translations adaptively select and transform metaphors in names of characters in different dimensions. It is expected to open up new directions for the

research of English translations of Water Margin and provide a new perspective for understanding and evaluating various translations.

3. Research Methodology

Hu Gengshen (2004) put forward the adaptation and selection theory of Eco-ranslatology, that is, the translator's adaptation to the translational eco-environment and implement selection as the translational eco-environment[6]. The process of translation is described as a cyclical alternations of adaptation and selection of the translator. The specific characteristics of selective adaptation and adaptive selection in the translation process are "adaptation" --the translator's adaptation to the ecological environment of translation; the translator's selection is based on the identity of ecological environment of translation, as is shown in the following figure (Hu, 2011)[7].

Under the principle of multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptive selection, the translation method of adaptation and selection theory focuses on the adaptive selection transformation of linguistic, cultural and communicative dimension. The transformation of linguistic dimension refers to the translator's adaptive transformation of linguistic forms in the process of translation. In translation, translators need to choose vocabulary and sentences that are in line with the ecological environment as well as the ecological context of the target language to the maximum extent possible, so that people from different language backgrounds can understand and accept the information conveyed in translation.

The transformation of cultural dimension refers to the translator's need to adapt to the cultural ecology of the source language and pay attention to the transmission of bilingual cultural connotation in the process of translation. Translators should have cultural awareness and a deep understanding of both the source and target language cultures during the translation process. They should be able to accurately convey cultural information to the target language readers, making the translation conform to the target language's ecosystem. Translation is a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication, so overcoming obstacles caused by cultural differences and striving to protect the balance of the cultural ecology of the two languages can ensure the smooth implementation of information exchange.

The transformation of communicative dimension refers to the adaptive selection of communicative subject and the transformation of bilingual communicative intention, which requires the translator to emphasize the transformation of linguistic and cultural information as well as the reflection of communicative intention in the original text on translation (Hu, 2013)[8]. Metaphor translation should not only transform the metaphor of the original text as much as possible, but also convey the purpose of communication under the condition of ensuring that there is no cultural loss. This kind of translation fits in a high degree of holistic adaptation and selection.

4. Data collection and analysis

There are many Chinese versions of Water Margin, including 16 simplified versions and 8 complex versions, but the names of characters are the same in any Chinese version. Its four English versions were separately translated by Pearl S. Buck in 1933, Jackson J. H. in 1937, Shapiro S. in 1980 and John Dent-Young and Alex Dent-Young in 1994, namely, All Men Are Brothers, The Water Margin, The Outlaws of The Marsh and The Marshes of Mount Liang. The data of this study comes from the Chinese version published by

People's Literature Publishing House in 1997, and the translations of these animal metaphors in four English translations.

Among the nicknames of 108 heroes in Water Margin, there are 37 nicknames with animal metaphors, of which the metaphor translations of 12 nicknames are almost without obvious distinction in four English versions. For example, the four versions of " 白日鼠 " are Rat in the Daylight, Daylight Rat, The Daylight Rat, The Daytime Rat. There are 15 nicknames translated with slight differences in the four English versions, but there is no error or failure in the vehicles or the purpose of communication, such as " 扑天鵰 " translated into Eagle Who Smites the Heavens, Striking Hawk, The Heaven Soaring Eagle, and Skyhawk in the four versions. However, there are also 10 heroes nicknamed after animals translated in different forms by different translators. Because the translation strategy and the author's understanding of the original culture are different, there are great differences in the language of retaining the metaphors, the cultural connotation of metaphors and the communicative intention metaphors intend to express.

4.1. Temperament and Vehicle

笑面虎 --Zhu Fu
Pearl: The Smiling Faced Tiger
Jackson: Laughing Tiger
Shapiro: The Smiling Tiger
Youngs: Smiler

The metaphor of " 笑面虎 " has become a conventional modifier in China to describe people who are kind in appearance but fierce in heart (Chinese Dictionary, p. 989)[9]. The character Zhu Fu in the novel is kind-hearted with an open smile, but his mind is prudent and resourceful, so he gets this nickname. The explanation of this metaphor in the English-Chinese Dictionary is smiling tiger—outwardly kind but inwardly cruel person (p. 1795)[9]. The internal meaning of this metaphor cannot be seen from the four translated versions, so the translation of this metaphor loses Chinese cultural characteristics under the transformation of cultural dimension in the three-dimensional transformation of Eco-translatology. For the translation of names, it is too long to explain the metaphorical meaning by adding footnotes. It can be translated into the hypocritically smiling tiger, which can not only retain the metaphor, but also achieve the transformation of linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions.

玉麒麟 --Lu Junyi
Pearl: The Jade Chi'Lin
Jackson: Jeweled Chinlin
Shapiro: The Jade Unicorn
Youngs: The Unicorn

" 麒麟 " is a mythical beast in ancient Chinese legend (Chinese Dictionary, p. 713)[9]. It is a benevolent and moral beast in people's minds, which is used as a metaphor for excellent people, symbolizing nobility and auspiciousness. Lu Junyi is a hero, highly skilled in martial art, so the metaphor is used to represent his handsome appearance and prominent status in people's hearts. Pearl and Jackson adopt transliteration without annotation, leading to the misunderstanding of target readers, because its transliteration cannot be found in general English dictionaries. The image of "unicorn" is similar to that of " 麒麟 " in China, which

is also a legendary animal (Chinese-English Dictionary, p. 1255)[10]. However, Youngs' translation omits " 玉 (symbolizing his handsome appearance) and does not realize the transformation of communicative dimension. Shapiro's translation, realizing the transformation of linguistic, cultural and communicative dimension, may be the most suitable version.

4.2. Expertise and Vehicle

旱地忽律 --Zhu Gui
Pearl: The Dry Land Water Beast
Jackson: Speedy Courier
Shapiro: The Dry-Land Crocodile
Youngs: Crocodile

"It cannot give play to its skills on land, but it is as ferocious as a crocodile on the water" (Sheng, 2018, p. 49)[11]. This metaphor is used to describe that Zhu Gui opens a hotel by the water to collect information for his companions. Jackson only realizes the transformation of communicative dimension, expressing that Zhu Gui's work is equivalent to courier while omitting the metaphor, and does not realize the transformation of language and culture. The Chinese-English Dictionary interprets " 忽律 " as crocodile or alligator. In Pearl's translation, the scope of metaphor is overlarge, and Youngs omit the meaning of " 旱地 (dry land)" during the translation. Shapiro's translation not only retains the metaphor, but also realizes the transformation of cultural and communicative dimensions.

出洞蛟 --Tong Wei
Pearl: Crocodile out of the Hold
Jackson: Cave Crocodile
Shapiro: The Dragon from the Cave
Youngs: The Cave Dragon
翻江蜃 --Tong Meng
Pearl: The Oyster That Turns the River over
Jackson: Whirling Conch Shell
Shapiro: The River Churning Clam
Youngs: The River Rider

In Chinese-English Dictionaries, " 蛟 " refers to a dragon, a mythical creation capable of invoking storms and floods (p. 791)[10]. Tong Wei, highly skilled in diving, can float and sail in the river, giving his opponent a fatal blow like a fierce dragon in water war. The vehicle of the metaphor is not accurately translated by Pearl and Jackson failing to realize the transformation of linguistic and cultural dimensions. " 出洞蛟 " is actually the dragon out of the cave. Youngs' translation means a dragon in the cave, inconsistent with out of the cave. Shapiro's translation, realizing three-dimensional transformation, is the most proper expression of this metaphor.

" 蜃 " refers to an animal like a dragon that brews storms on rivers and seas. Tong Meng is Tong the younger brother of Tong Wei, so it should also be translated as a dragon. Oyster, Conch Shell, Clam and Rider in the four translated versions have not realized the transformation of linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions. It can be translated into The Dragon Churning the River, echoing with his

brother, The Dragon from the Cave.

病大虫 --Xue Yong
Pearl: The Sick Tiger
Jackson: Sick Tiger
Shapiro: The Sick Tiger
Youngs: The Pill Monger

During the Tang (618-907 A.D.) and Song (960-1279 A.D.) Dynasties, tigers are prevalent, and the folk worshiped the power of tigers, so those who were brave and powerful were often called " 大 虫 ", that is, tigers. " 病 " in the culture of Song refers to "being comparable and surpassing" (Sheng, 2018, p. 153-154)[11]. This metaphor is used to indicate the proficient martial art of Xue Yong, which is no derogatory color. In the interpretation of Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary, "sick" is equivalent to ill, which has the same negative emotional color as pill (p. 1621)[10]. The four translated versions are literal translation, which does not realize the transformation of cultural and communicative dimensions. It can be translated into Fierce Tiger.

母大虫 --The Wife of Gu
Pearl: The Female Tiger, The Good Wife Ku
Jackson: Tigress
Shapiro: The Tigress
Youngs: Auntie Gu

The wife of Gu is a masculine woman with a forthright temperament, intelligent mind and powerful spirit far beyond her husband. The stories of Gu in the novel do not show that she possesses the ferocity of a tiger, but are an image of a heroine. Tigress means the female tiger, which is also a fierce woman in English-Chinese Dictionaries (p. 2126) (p. 1621)[10]. The translation of Youngs, omitting the metaphor, only reveals that she is a female, failing to realize the transformation of linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions. Pearl adopts literal translation, while The Good Wife Ku belongs to her own subjective over-translation, which is inconsistent with the fierce woman this metaphor intends to express, failing to realize the transformation of cultural and communicative dimensions. The translations of Jackson and Shapiro not only retain the metaphor, but also realize three-dimensional transformation.

浪里白跳 --Zhang Shun
Pearl: White Stripe in the Waves
Jackson: White Fish
Shapiro: White Streak in the Waves
Youngs: White Eel

Zhang Shun can hide under the water for seven days and nights, quickly shuttle through the rough waves, and flash past like a silver white fish with agile action. "String" and "Streak" in Pearl and Shapiro's translations belong to dead translations, which neither preserve the metaphorical mode nor realize the transformation of cultural and communicative dimensions. The translation of Jackson and Youngs retains the vehicle, but the omission of " 浪里 (in the waves)" does not realize the transformation of linguistic and

communicative dimensions. It can be translated into White Eel in the Waves to realize the transformation of three dimensions.

出林龙 --Zou Yuan
Pearl: Dragon out of the Wood
Jackson: Forest Dragon
Shapiro: The Dragon from the Forest
Youngs: Forester

The description of the first emergence of Zou Yuan is "naturally loyal and upright, with amazing martial arts. Woods is a place smaller than forest, so forest is more suitable than wood to represent his powerful skills. In Pearl's translation, "out of Wood" refers to a kind of material, which does not realize the linguistic and communicative transformations, while Jackson's translation is limited to the forest rather than outside the forest, failing to realize the communicative transformation. Youngs intend to express its communicative meaning by omitting the metaphor. However, "Forester" means a man who works in a forest, which is quite different from the meaning of " 出林 (out of the forest)" in the nickname, and does not realize the linguistic, cultural and communicative transformations. Shapiro's translation not only retains the metaphor, but also realize the transformation of cultural and communicative dimensions.

5. Results and discussion

By comparing the four English translations of the nicknames of these characters in Water Margin, it is found that each translation varies in terms of linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. Only a few translations have achieved ideal three-dimensional transformations in specific nickname translations. Translators may omit metaphors, resulting in the loss of cultural connotations; the translations may be inaccurate, unable to accurately convey the original meaning of the nickname; or they may result in misunderstandings and varying degrees of defects in the translated version due to the differences in cultural backgrounds.

From the results, it can be seen that the translation of nicknames in Water Margin faces many difficulties. Firstly, the traditional Chinese cultural elements contained in nicknames and other mythical creatures, as well as the names related to constellations, pose great challenges for translators who are not familiar with Chinese culture to accurately understand and translate them appropriately. Secondly, metaphors and puns in nicknames are difficult to find exact corresponding expressions in English. This special semantic translation is prone to errors. Furthermore, different translators have different understandings and focuses on the original work, resulting in significant differences in translation strategies and thus affecting the quality of the translation.

Pearl tends to adopt literal translation, often converting directly according to the literal meaning, with less in-depth exploration and flexible handling of cultural connotations. Pearl lacks a precise grasp of the cultural information behind words with specific cultural orientations, and has insufficient understanding of the unique biological images in Chinese mythological culture. This literal translation style results in significant deficiencies in the transmission of cultural dimensions, although the translation retains some language structure. Readers find it difficult to feel the charm of traditional Chinese culture carried by

nicknames in the translation, and cannot accurately understand the inherent connection between nicknames and characters.

Partial translations done by Jackson can accurately extract core imagery. But sometimes he oversimplifies and focuses on the implementation of communicative dimension, sacrificing cultural and linguistic dimensions, resulting in a significant loss of cultural connotations. This strategy may make the translation easy for target language readers to understand the superficial meaning, but cannot allow readers to appreciate the rich cultural heritage and unique linguistic charm of the original nicknames, resulting in a one-sided presentation of the original work.

Shapiro focuses relatively on preserving cultural connotations and accurately expressing linguistic dimension, attempting to find a balance between cultural and linguistic levels to achieve effective communication. In translation, he is able to accurately grasp metaphors with Chinese cultural characteristics and describe them in conjunction with corresponding scenarios. While conveying cultural information, it also allows readers to intuitively understand the meaning of nicknames through the translation. However, although Shapiro attaches great importance to cultural elements as a whole, he may still have inaccurate understanding when facing some rare and complex cultural images.

Youngs focus on the information of cultural dimension in the translation process. When dealing with nicknames with complex cultural backgrounds, they are able to select relatively suitable vehicles within a limited range, conveying certain information in the cultural dimension. But sometimes the grasp of the overall context and cultural background is not comprehensive enough. Youngs lacked in-depth cultural research and accurate understanding when dealing with culturally specific semantics, resulting in errors in cultural transmission and semantic expression in the translation, and failed to achieve three-dimensional transformation.

6. Conclusion

Metaphor, as a linguistic phenomenon, is closely combined with a specific context and culture rather than existing in isolation and being formed spontaneously away from the social and cultural environment. Metaphor translation is culture-oriented, so different translation strategies should be adopted for different cultures. The purpose of translation is to let readers understand the content of the article, and then make their acquaintance with all aspects of foreign countries through the translated works. Therefore, the task of the translator is to deeply comprehend the cultural discrepancies between two nations, so as to translate authentic works and act as the messenger of civilization. Metaphor translation in literary works not only needs to meet the transformation of cultural and communicative dimensions, but also has to maintain the writing style and characteristics of the author as much as possible, realizing the transformation of linguistic dimension as much as possible.

When translating metaphors rich in specific cultural connotations, translators need to delve into the cultural background of the original work and accurately grasp the inherent meaning of the original metaphor. Efforts should be made to preserve the vehicles to convey cultural characteristics, while also considering the comprehension ability of the target language readers. Annotations, free translation, and other methods should be used to assist in the explanation and achieve effective transformation between cultural and communicative dimensions. In addition, communication between different translators is also crucial for brainstorming and

optimizing translation plans. Publishers and the literary communities should also pay attention to the control of quality of such translated works, and promote the more accurate and vivid dissemination of classic literary works internationally.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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