

The Influence of Chinese Diasporic Translators on Foreign Dissemination of Contemporary Chinese Literature: A Case Study of the Dissemination of Ken Liu's Translation of the Three-Body Problem in English-speaking World

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Abstract: In recent years, the study of diasporic translators is becoming more and more popular in translation research. The diasporic translators are playing an important role in the dissemination of Chinese literature. Because of their dual cultural identity (born in China but live in abroad), their subjectivity and inherent language advantage into full play, so that diasporic translators can analyse the literature work from the perspective of a third party. What's more, their translation work is more acceptable in abroad. Taking the successful publication of *The Three-Body Problem* translated by the Chinese diasporic translator Ken Liu as an example, this paper discusses the foreign dissemination mode and the "going global" mode of Chinese contemporary literature from the perspective of Communication Studies. Finally, it can be concluded that the combination of communication channels and literary translation activities can be highly effective in disseminating more Chinese contemporary literary works to the world.

1. Introduction

In recent years, China has attached great importance to the "going global" of Chinese culture, and this goal can be realized in a good way, that is, to disseminate Chinese literature works to other countries. As an excellent science fiction in contemporary China, the *Three-Body-problem* gains a sound reputation in English-speaking world, which can be a good example for the dissemination of Chinese culture since there are few Chinese literature works can appear in the mainstream market in Western countries. On the one hand, the success of this book is mainly related to the author Liu Cixin, who is a native with a great passion and knowledge about science fiction, with a strong reasoning style in his novel, it fits the appetite of English readers well. Besides, one critical factor for the book's success cannot do without its translator, Ken Liu, a Chinese diasporic translator who is born in China but living in abroad. With authentic English skills and profound understanding about Chinese history, his translation of *The Three-Body-problem* has a higher acceptance and prestige, and it quickly becomes a cult day by day. This paper will discuss why the novel is so popular in English-speaking world through the case study of the successful dissemination of Ken Liu's translation in western countries, so as to provide some suggestions for the dissemination of Chinese literature works.

2. The Concept of Diasporic Translators

The term "Li San" originates from the English word "diaspora", which refers to the Jewish exiles who have drifted outside their hometown to different regions of the world. But they always have a kind of spiritual yearning for their homeland, and keep a kind of inalienable connection with their spirit homeland. After the generalization of the word "diaspora's" definition, it has the following characteristics: the typical diasporic phenomenon is usually caused by political factors, which causes a group to move out of their hometown as a whole and drift to other places. Such groups

often retain a collective memory, which is the essential element for their unique identity. These groups keep in touch with their hometown in some specific ways, which is often reflected in their strong nostalgia for their hometown.

Wang Shirong (2017:104) points out that Chinese diasporic translators are “a group that leaves the mainland of China to live around the world and engages in translation relating to cultural work.” However, the concept of diasporic translators will change over the time. Taking the personnel beyond the mainland of China that engage in translation work for example, many of them can't be called diasporic translator, because the word “diaspora” contains the translator's deep obsession to his hometown. On the one hand, most of them have the adrift life experience, finally they move overseas and integrate into the local native's lifestyle. On the other hand, although they are far away from their homeland, they have always adhered to their cultural shelter, and keep in touch with their hometowns in a certain way, assuming the responsibility of promoting cultural dissemination between China and the West. In this regard, I believe that diasporic translators can be defined as the people that are far away from their own country and engage in the work relating to translation, but they are always haunted by their native culture mentally and have a myriad of connection with their homeland.

3. Ken Liu and the Dissemination of the Three-Body Problem in English-speaking World

Ken Liu and his family emigrated to the United States when he was 11, then he accepted education there. Although he works and studies overseas for a long time, he has always kept a connection with the Chinese culture in his mind, hoping to translate some Chinese contemporary science fiction to English readers, in this way they can know a more realistic and objective image of China, therefore he belongs to the group of diasporic translators. Ken Liu majored in law at his college time, which laid a solid foundation for the rigor of his thinking logic. Besides, he likes writing science fiction in his leisure time, which is also a great help for his later translation work of science fiction. As a diasporic translator, Ken Liu has his own cultural consciousness, living in an environment dominated by English culture for many years, he has a keen perception to English readers' reading habit and thinking mode, he also has a personal experience on the acceptance of cultural heterogeneity. Therefore, while dealing with the relations between fidelity and readability of the translation, they will tend to compromise (Wang Shirong, 2015:143). This is also one of the advantages of diasporic translators, they not only cater to the expectation of English readers for foreign cultures, but also spread the foreign cultures in return.

In regard to the researches of Chinese contemporary literature spreading abroad, most scholars are only focusing on the translation strategies so far. However, in many cases, the successful dissemination of an outstanding work in English world not only relates to the translation quality and strategy, but also matters with the communication factors such as the publication of the work, readers' preferences, marketing promotion, experts' recommendation etc. Combining the principles of Communication Studies with the success of contemporary Chinese literature in English-speaking world, we can make a better study about why this book can achieve success overseas. Therefore, according to the “5W” communication mode of Lasswell, this paper will analyze how *The Three-Body Problem* disseminates in the English-speaking world and the reasons for its great success. Lasswell's “5W” communication mode means that every specific communication process is composed of five elements, namely, communication subject, communication content, communication channel, communication object and communication effect. That is the “5W” mode we talk about, i.e., who → Says what → In Which Channel → To whom → With what effects (Lasswell, 2015:5).

(1) Communication subject

People used to think that the communication subject of literary works is only the author himself, but according to the view of Communication Studies, except for the translators, other factors such as authors, publishers, patrons, etc. that can promote the translation and dissemination process belong to the subjects of translation and dissemination. The translator is the core subject of translation (Hu Yan, 2015).

First of all, in light of the translator of *The Three-Body Problem* trilogy, Ken Liu is both the first and third book's translator. Ken Liu was born in China, but he has lived and studied in the United States for a long time, so he has proficient English skills, as well as some profound insights into Chinese culture. He himself is writing science fiction in English as a hobby, and his work is well received by American readers, which fully shows that he has a good command of English skills and understands the reading interests of science fiction fans. Ken Liu also has a deep knowledge of traditional Chinese literature and often adds Chinese elements to his works. What's more, Ken Liu has already gained some fame in English-speaking world as a science fiction writer. He is the winner of both the Hugo Award and the Nebula Award, which undoubtedly makes the English version of *The Three-Body Problem* attractive to a large number of readers in English-speaking world.

Secondly, *The Three-Body Problem* is published in the United States in cooperation with TorBooks. It has been voted the best science fiction publisher for 20 years in a row, and has published many works of Hugo and Nebula Award winners. The social capital and cultural capital accumulated by TorBooks for a long time have laid the solid foundation for *The Three-Body Problem* to enter the American market smoothly, because for readers, being chosen by such a publisher means that this work is worth anticipating (Zhang Qi, 2020:85). The chapters of English version of this book also differ from the original. For example, when we read the Chinese version, the order of category is: 1. scientific boundaries; 2. Table tennis; 3. Shooters and farmers... while the English version is: 1. *The Madness Years* (China, 1967); 2. *Silent Spring*..... From the comparison we can see that the contents of "Cultural Revolution", which originally locates in the first part of the book, is shifted into the middle part of Chinese version, while the English version is completely edited according to the sequence of the trilogy, with the introduction of unique Chinese element, the "Cultural Revolution", presenting in the beginning. Through such a subtle change, it makes the book in line with the English readers' reading expectation and thinking mode, which in return greatly improves the acceptance of the book. Meanwhile, readers who are interested in Chinese history would be enthusiastic as soon as they read the book, and a willingness to continue the reading.

Finally, the reports of mainstream media and the recommendation of well-known writers in English-speaking world have increased the popularity of *The Three-Body Problem*. It receives broad attention and great acclaim from the media as soon as it is released. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal* and other major media have published articles giving very positive comments on this book. The *Washington Post*, for example, recommends two passages, one of which describes *The Three-Body Problem* as a perfect blend of "hard science" and adventure that discusses and explores politics, philosophy and virtual reality. The *New Yorker* calls Liu Cixin's novel "provoke the excitement of exploration and grand beauty" and "a meditation on the ultimate human question". Even George Martin, author of *A Song of Ice and Fire* trilogy, acknowledges Ken Liu's translation and says: "The context style is very clear and compact, which is not always the case in other translation work. In that respect, Ken Liu does a very good job, his translation is very clear and concise (Martin George, 2015)." All these positive comments promote readers to accept and expect more from the English version of *The Three-Body Problem*.

(2) Communication content

Communication content mainly refers to the selection of translation materials. Presently, the most literature works China have promoted are often of high literary value written by famous writers. However, most of these works depict the most ordinary people's daily life and social issues, expressing their sympathy to the people living in poverty and the condemnation of inequality. For English readers who don't know much about Chinese history, it's difficult to provoke readers' resonance. Although Chinese government and some organizations have been trying to translate and introduce contemporary Chinese literature to foreign countries, but the dissemination effect is not so ideal. For a long time, Chinese science fiction has been on the edge of mainstream literature, and it is not recommended by professional writers, nor is it the core part in the process of foreign dissemination. In recent years, with the popularity of *The Three-Body Problem*, some scholars have

gradually paid their attention to the international dissemination of Chinese science fiction. Therefore, when choosing the translation materials, we must be careful with the literature works we are going to choose. Not only should a certain literary value being considered, which can bring English readers a foreign cultural experience, but also to its market value, which can widely spread a real image of China in English-speaking world. The universality of world literature and the particularity of Chinese culture are critical prerequisites for the acceptance of Chinese literature.

The Three-Body Problem narrates the story of the ups and downs of the earth civilization in the vast universe. It discusses human nature with science fiction as the carrier. Its language is magnificent and its layout has far-reaching meaning. The high quality and universality make it easier to be accepted and spread. In addition, its unique heterogeneity and Chinese characteristic elements are important factors to make it widely disseminated. Liz Galinsky, editor of the English version of The Three-Body Problem, has said that Tor Books is interested in this book because it has “a completely different content from American science fiction(Liao Ziwei, 2017)”. Therefore, when translating some literature works, we should take the literary needs of English readers into account and give priority to those works that are highly readable and those contain excellent traditional Chinese culture in communication process.

(3) Communication channel

Communication channel refers to the ways in which literature works are promoted. If excellent literary works want to be successful overseas, in addition to the high quality of the works, the way of promotion is also particularly crucial. The success of The Three-Body Problem in English-speaking world is not the result of the translator alone, it also includes multiple dissemination channels such as Chinese-foreign cooperative publishing method and vigorous publicity by public media.

The domestic press of The Three-Body Problem is China Educational Publications Import & Export corp., Ltd, it's a pilot project of innovative “whole process copyright trade”, it extends “the traditional industrial chain of copyright trade from upstream to downstream, controlling from the translation to the publishing, then to the overseas marketing, and on each link it finds suitable partner (Chen Feng, Ma Huijuan, 2016:57).”In the process of foreign dissemination, the company chose the way of cooperation with American TorBooks. TorBooks is one of the biggest press in the field of science fiction, it has won the award for best science fiction publishers 20 years in a row. It has published many science fictions that win the honor of “The Nebula Award” and “The Hugo Award”. What's more, it has a strong capital markets and resources of readers in the United States. Together, the two companies promote the spread of this book in the English world greatly. Domestic publishers choose to cooperate with the well-known American publishers, which ensures a clear sales channel for The Three-Body Problem in the Western countries.

The book becomes a cult partly because of its previous advertisement on the main media. As early as the publication of this novel, the Chinese publisher makes a short video “Not Afraid” as the book's network promotion in social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. On the occasion of Chinese online novels get popular all over the world, it can quickly raise the public awareness to this book in English-speaking world through online promotion. And authoritative journals of American such as New York times, Washington times, etc., are giving very positive evaluations to this novel. The academic magazine Science even devotes a book review program to introduce the plot of The Three-Body Problem to readers (China Youth Network, 2015). The feedbacks from these media have expanded the market influence of The Three-Body Problem and promote the growth of its sales.

(4) Communication object

Communication object is the selection of target audience. Before publishing a book, we usually analyze the various types of readers. It is a problem worth discussing before literature works are published, whether we should aim at the intellectuals with a certain literary accomplishment or pay more attention to the general public. The assessment from readers in the dissemination process plays an increasingly critical role. While spreading literature works to foreign countries, most of the communication objects are English readers, nearly few works are able to enter the English world

and achieve success dominated by the Western culture for centuries, so we must understand the target readers' reading interest and thinking logic, thus making some adjustments accordingly, and finally we can achieve a better communication effect. Only when the target audiences are willing to participate in the conversation with the author and accept our values, can our communication process be meaningful.

As for *The Three-Body Problem*, its English readers probably include the science fiction professionals, science fiction lovers and ordinary readers. First of all, Western science fiction professionals come mainly from two organizations, the World Science Fiction Association and the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association of America. Almost all of them are the members of both organizations, whether it is a famous writer, such as Isaac Asimov, Arthur Clarke, or science fiction editor, researcher, etc., their evaluations to this book would influence its market environment critically, they are also the main determinants of whether this novel could enter into the classic palace of world science fiction (Wu Yun, He Min, 2019:94). Then it comes to the science fiction fans. Usually, they are picky and have a preference for the works written by science fiction writers they have already known, but sometimes they will also explore the works of some new writers out of interest. Finally, the ordinary readers who are interested in current literature affairs account for a large part of the "target audience", to know more details about this novel, or the reason why this book are so popular in the major media and journals, such a curiosity attracts a lot of ordinary readers. If we could find more potential target readers, figure out their reading expectations and formulate corresponding dissemination strategies, not only can we expand the influence of *The Three-Body Problem*, but also more English readers can know the different cultures, development patterns and social trends in China.

(5) Communication effect

The communication effect of *The Three-Body Problem* can be analyzed from the following aspects: the number of awards, the comments of celebrities and ordinary readers, and the reports of western mainstream media. First, as soon as the English version of *The Three-Body Problem* is published, many responses have been heard from the international science fiction club. Meanwhile, it has attracted and won the Nebula Award (nominated) of fantasy science association in 2014, the annual award for best novel Prometheus (nominated) in 2015, the Hugo award for best novel in 2015 etc. All these awards have indicated that this novel has achieved a great success in English-speaking world. Second, the recommendations and praises from the famous writers can make English readers believe that this book is charming and interesting, which increases its popularity spontaneously, the remarks from ordinary readers help this novel appear in the list of best-seller, because they are the final dissemination objects, only when they accept the book and acclaim our values, can our goal be completed. "The Three-Body Problem is so imaginative," former US President Barack Obama said after reading the book. "The background is so grand, after reading the book, I feel that being the president of the United States is nothing compared to the vast universe (Michiko Kakutani, 2017)." "After all, my duty is to deal with the trivial arguments of the parliament every day rather than worrying about alien invasion." The book's rank rises up rapidly on Amazon's best-seller list after their reviews are published. Therefore, it's clear that good reviews from celebrities can have an obvious impact on the book sales, too. A reader from Amazon.com also describes the book as "the most influential science fiction book ever written," with "a great story and a great translation." Such assessments could enhance the book sales to a large extent. Finally, the reports of Western mainstream media can be served as a benchmark to measure the influence of a literature work. Authoritative journals in English-speaking world, such as the *New Yorker*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Guardian*, have all given positive comments to *The Three-Body Problem*. The American magazine *Science* even writes a separate article for the book to introduce the Chinese science fiction to English readers, and comments that "The Three-Body Problem has made readers around the world feel the quality of Chinese contemporary science fiction, and it deserves the Hugo Award (Yevgeniya Nusinovich, 2015)." The reports of these western mainstream media have approved its popularity in English-speaking world, which also reflects its ideal communication effect.

4. Conclusion

In face of the development of economic globalization, the Chinese government wants to spread more elements of Chinese characteristic, and it has carried out many projects such as “Library of Chinese Classics”, “Panda Books” to achieve this goal. Literature, as a carrier of national culture, can not only preserve the characteristic culture of the nation, but also introduce to people around the world a different image of China through foreign dissemination. The Three-Body Problem, as a science fiction work that has been successfully spread in English-speaking world, can provide a good inspiration for the dissemination of contemporary Chinese literature works. First, it is the matter of literature translators, the Chinese diasporic translator Ken Liu has his unique advantages in this aspect, as a Chinese-American science fiction writer, he is proficient in the language skills of both English and Chinese, while knowing a lot about Chinese history. Besides, he has a keen insight to the culture and language habits of the English readers and aesthetic temperament. While translating some plots with Chinese characteristics, he takes great caution to maintain the heterogeneity of the original work but be considerate to readers’ feeling at the same time, he is playing the role as a coordinator of different cultures. When choosing translation strategies, diasporic translators are also more flexible and neutral, so they could perform better in the process of “going global” of Chinese culture (Liu Kongxi, 2019:54). Last but not least, by combining the “5W” dissemination mode with the process of promoting Chinese contemporary literature, we can yield twice the result with half the effort. Taking the success of the English version of The Three-Body Problem as an opportunity, we will commit to translate more literature works to the English-speaking world.

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