An Analysis of the Thick Translation in the English Version of William A. Lyell's New Year's Sacrifice

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Abstract: William A. Lyell's English translation of *New Year's Sacrifice* is well received by overseas readers and widely recognized by scholars of Lu Xun's works at home and abroad. Based on the theory of "thick translation", this paper takes the English version as the research target, and analyzes the application of the thick translation strategy in the translation. Through the exploration of the preface, background introduction, Chinese pronunciation notes, footnotes, and implicit notes in the translation, it is found that the thick translation has the functions of emphasizing historical and cultural context, breaking down reading barriers, explaining meaning, introducing background, and paving the way in depth, which are keys to the successful presentation of the translation of *New Year's Sacrifice*. Thick translation can serve as a guide for the translation of Chinese literary works. Upon conducting an in-depth exploration of this translation, here comes an enlightenment: to produce a quality and well-received translation, a translator must explain the profound meanings, promote culture transmission, and highlight his subjectivity.

1. Introduction

New Year's Sacrifice is a short story written by Lu Xun (1881-1936), a writer from China. It tells the tragic story of Sister Xianglin. An intellectual "I" who was far away from home, after returning to his hometown at the end of the old calendar, stayed at the home of his fourth uncle, prepared a new year's sacrifice, and witnessed the unfortunate death of his fourth uncle's former maid, Sister Xianglin.

With the growth of China's comprehensive national strength, more and more foreign translators are engaged in the translation and research of Chinese literary works. William A. Lyell is a famous American expert on Lu Xun and one of the scholars of Chinese language and literature. He has done extensive researches on Lu Xun's works and is widely recognized by scholars of Lu Xun's works at home and abroad. At present, the study of Lyell's English translation of Lu Xun's works mainly includes three aspects: the first is a comprehensive review of Lylle's translation of Lu Xun's works; the second is an analysis of Lyell's translation from the perspective of skopostheorie and functionalism; the third is the comparative study of Lylle's translation and other versions from different theoretical perspectives.

Based on this, this paper intends to analyze the English version of William A. Lyell's *New Year's Sacrifice* from the perspective of thick translation, to study the application of thick

translation in the version and the significance of thick translation in the translation of Chinese literary works.

2. Brief Introduction to Thick Translation Theory

Thick translation, which originated from the anthropological study of "thick description", has attracted much attention in the field of translation since it was put forward. The concept of "thick translation" was firstly proposed by an American scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah, which is to "seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context"[1]. And Appiah believed that these explanatory words inside and outside the text could supplement a large number of cultural background knowledge of the source language, so that readers can better receive the information conveyed by the original author in the process of reading, and achieve the best understanding effect. The thick translation strategy is to convey the required implicit background information to the reader through several narrative articles such as a preface, background introduction, footnotes and postscript, so as to make the translation more pure and conducive to the reader's reading and appreciation.

This concept was first introduced in China by *A Dictionary of Translation Studies*[2]. Over the past 10 years, the government has vigorously advocated enhancing cultural self-confidence and actively promoting the dissemination of Chinese culture. Under this grand background, Chinese academic circles have devoted unprecedented enthusiasm to thick translation, including theoretical analysis[3] and heated discussion on thick translation practice[4]. The concept of thick translation has been expanding, and its types and functions have been enriched.

According to Li Xiang's research, thick translation can be divided into two categories according to its spatial position: thick translation within the edition and thick translation outside the edition. Thick translation within the edition can be divided into thick translation inside the text and thick translation outside the text. Thick translation inside the text is divided into two categories: inside the sentence and outside the sentence[5]. Based on this classification, this paper focuses on the thick translation in the edition and analyzes the preface background and Chinese pronunciation notes outside the translation, as well as the footnotes outside the sentence and the implicit notes inside the sentence.

3. Thick Translation within the Edition

In William A. Lyell's English translation of *Diary of a Madman,* there are 2 pages of preface, 35 pages of introduction, and 8 pages of pronunciation notes, which greatly increase the thickness of the original text. As a story in the book, there are 34 footnotes in *New Year's Sacrifice*.

3.1 Thick Translation outside the Text

Thick translation outside the text refers to the deep interpretation outside the target text. This usually includes in-depth analysis and interpretation of the cultural background, historical context and the author's intention of the original text, helping readers better understand the deep meaning carried by the translation. This section analyzes and explores the preface and background of William Lyell's translation, as well as the Chinese pronunciation notes.

3.1.1 Preface and Background

In the 327 words of the preface, Lu Xun's birthplace, Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, is introduced, with picturesque farmhouses, white walls, and rivers crisscrossing the lush green countryside. Long, narrow boats with retractable bamboo roofs and misty mountains on the horizon draw the reader in.

It introduces the background of Lu Xun's declining squire family and the old social system at that time, which was full of cruelty and injustice, as well as Lu Xun, as a generation of intellectuals deeply rooted in the background of that era, with one foot trapped in tradition and the other trying to step into the modern world, using most of his life to save China which was being swallowed up and corrupted by the imperialist countries of the East and the West.

The background introduction is 35 pages long, including Lu Xun's life and his experience of quitting medical career to pursue literature, the social background and political situation, the relationship between the stories and reality, and the translation process and translation strategies of William A. Lyell's translated works. It describes in detail the author's class standpoint, political ideas, the environment of the times, the production of the original text and the history and culture, which provides sufficient background materials for readers to understand and understand the original text.

William A. Lyell uses a large number of preface and background introduction to expand the thickness and knowledge of the translation, providing guidance readers to understand China, history and culture in the early 20th century, as well as Lu Xun, so that readers can have a deeper understanding of the profound significance of the short story *New Year's Sacrifice*. The application of "thick translation" highlights the translator's subjectivity. The translator maintains a balance among the original text, the target text and the reader, and weakens the reader's sense of strangeness in the face of the target text, so that the reader can understand the target text in the social, historical and cultural background of the target text.

3.1.2 Pronunciation Notes

Considering that Lu Xun's short stories are full of Chinese names, Chinese addresses, and things with Chinese characteristics, William A. Lyell has been using the Chinese Pinyin system or transliteration in the process of translation. Lyell takes advantage of the translator's subjectivity and adds pronunciation notes to provide detailed guidance on how to pronounce. To ensure the comprehensibility and conciseness of the notes, he created five abbreviations: MBA (may be (roughly) approximated), EW (English word), CW (Chinese word), RW (rhymes with) and SL (sounds like), and tried to clarify the pronunciation rules by analogy between English and Chinese.

There are three pronunciation notes in the article *New Year's Sacrifice*: (1) Sister **Xianglin**: Xi in Xiang MBA by EW see; the ang of Xiang RW gong Lin SL lean. (2)**Kangxi**: Kang RW gong; xi MBA by EW see. (3) Mother **Liu**: Liu is include because it is so often mispronounced. It does not SL EWS Lee (surname) and you said together, but more like EW Leo said as a single syllable[6].

This kind of notes on the pronunciation supplemented by Lyell provides the target language readers with the experience of learning Chinese, which is helpful for the target language readers to read the names in the articles, reduce reading barriers, stimulate their curiosity and interest in Chinese, and promote Chinese culture to go out.

3.2 Thick Translation inside the Text

Thick translation inside the text refers to the deep processing within the target text. This section explores deep translation outside the sentence (explanatory footnotes, background descriptive footnotes, deep foreshadowing footnotes) and deep translation inside the sentence (in-text implicit annotation).

3.2.1 Thick Translation outside the Sentence--Footnotes

When discussing the specific methods of thick translation, Zhang Peiyao classifies the in-depth context in *Selected English Translations of Chinese Translation Discourse* into three types:

explanation, background description and foreshadowing[7]. On this basis, combined with the annotation characteristics of the translated version of *New Year's Sacrifice*, the author will also classify it according to its function in the context of depth.

Explanatory footnotes refer to the interpretation of proper nouns such as names of people, places, objects and cultural concepts in the original works. William A. Lyell used English equivalents to translate the text, retained the charm of the original text, and added footnotes to explain the words with rich connotations, so the footnotes in the translation were mostly explanatory notes.

Example 1

TT: The rubbing consisted of the single character meaning "Long life" and had been written by Venerable Founder **Chen Tuan**.

Footnote: A historical of the Five Dynasties period (907-59) who lived as a mountain recluse and, according to the tradition, became a Daoist Immortal.

William A. Lyell literally translated "Chen Tuan Lao Zu"[8] into "Venerable Founder Chen Tuan". Chen Tuan is very strange to the target language that does not understand Chinese history and culture. The footnote further introduces Chen Tuan, helping to deepen the target language readers' understanding of Chen Tuan, and explains to the target language readers why they should hang the characters written by Chen Tuan on the walls of their homes.

Background descriptive footnotes refer to the introduction of the author's background, ideology, cultural origin and so on. In the process of translation, footnotes are used to express the culture and background that can not be conveyed by a few sentences, helping create a three-dimensional image for the original monotonous translation.

Example 2

TT: "What about Sister Xianglin?" I asked apprehensively.

"She's **aged away**."

Footnotes: It would be unlucky to pronounce a word meaning "die" during the New Year period, hence the circumlocution.

The footnote describes the taboo in Chinese cultural practice that the mention of the word "death" during the New Year is regarded as a bad omen. Therefore, the original text cleverly uses the word "Lao (too old)" instead of the direct expression of "Si (death)". And in the translation, the translator also cleverly uses "aged away" instead of "die", maintaining the cultural implication and emotional color of the original text. The addition of this footnote not only enriches the situational description of the dialogue, but also deeply analyses the Chinese cultural connotation hidden behind this language expression. It enables the target readers to understand and perceive the language use and emotional sustenance in this specific cultural context across cultural boundaries, thus enhancing the academic nature of the translation and the cultural transmission.

Foreshadowing footnotes are used to introduce relevant knowledge around a theme or information, do a good job of logical foreshadowing, and provide a basis for the development of the following text.

Example 3

TT: An old **Imperial Collegian** and follower of **Neo-Confucianism**.

Footnote: "Imperial Collegian" (Jiansheng) might refer to someone actually placed in the Imperial College (Guozijian) at Beijing, or to someone, like Forth Uncle, who had been proclaimed "qualified" to be there. The title could either be earned through examination or bought. Neo-Confucianism is the school of Confucianism, somewhat puritanical and heavily influenced by Buddhist metaphysics, which dominated scholar-official circles in China from 1313 onward, the year when it was declared the orthodox ideology for interpretation of the classics in the civil service examinations. Its authority went virtually unchallenged until 1905, when the examination system was officially abolished.

The footnote here depicts the image of the fourth uncle who accepts the old ideas and habits of the old era in a more three-dimensional way. It also contrasts him with "I" as a new generation of intellectuals who are stuck in tradition with one foot and trying to enter the modern world with the other foot, thus paving the way for the collision of conversation and ideas between "I" and the fourth uncle in the following text, as well as for Fourth Uncle's disapproval of Sister Xianglin, his belief that she corrupts social customs, and his refusal to let her prepare the sacrificial food.

3.2.2 Translation within the Sentence--In-text Implicit Annotation

Implicit annotations are hidden in the specific sentences in the translation version, without any suggestive language or dashes, brackets and other symbols, which are integrated with the translation and can reduce reading barriers.

Example 1

TT: This was the "ritual offering" which would bring down bountiful blessings during the new year.

William A. Lyell translated "Fuli" into "ritual offering", introducing that it is actually an "offering to gods or ancestors", and then added an attributive clause as an implicit annotation to explain that these offerings can bring good luck and blessing to people in the new year. This expression not only retains the cultural connotation of "Fuli", but also explains it in detail through the form of an attributive clause, which makes the translation more academic and coherent. At the same time, it clearly conveys the important role and symbolic significance of "Fuli" during the new year.

Example 2

TT: At the Fifth Watch, just before dawn on New Year's Day.

William Lyell literally translated the "Wu Geng Tian" as "the Fifth Watch", and clearly pointed out through the parenthesis "representing the period just before dawn on New Year's Day". For the target language readers who are not familiar with Chinese culture, it explains the specific time of "the fifth watch day", breaks down the barriers of understanding, weakens the sense of cultural strangeness, and conveys the language style. In this translation, William A. Lyell not only faithfully reproduces the content and intention of the original text, but also further enriches the thickness and complexity of the translation and enhances its attractiveness and reading experience through carefully designed implicit annotations.

4. The Enlightenment of Thick Translation

4.1 Explaining the Profound Meaning

In this world, no language can be completely equal. The best translation is interpretation, which is the exchange and re-expression of a language, and the correspondence and re-expression of a culture and world outlook. As a translator, when carrying out translation work, one should accurately convey the profound meanings contained in the original text. Only in this way is it possible to translate high-quality papers. The quality of a translation often depends on whether the essence of the original text can be presented in its original flavor, enabling readers to also understand the core ideas and deep meanings that the original text intends to express through the translation, and thus making the translated papers possess the due value and readability.

In this translation, William A. Lyell annotates the pronunciation of Chinese and provides detailed guidance on how to pronounce it, which not only retains the characteristics of the original text, but also breaks down the reading barriers of the target language readers. Through a large number of footnotes outside the sentence and implicit notes inside the sentence, it explains the

cultural environment in detail, breaks through the shortcomings of many references in the original work, and describes in detail the author's class standpoint, political ideas, the environment of the times, and the production processing of the original text, history and culture, so as to provide readers with an in-depth understanding of the author and the source language and explain the profound meaning. Therefore, readers can be enlightened when reading, and truly understand the meaning of the translation.

4.2 Promoting Cultural Transmission

Language is a special part of culture. It is also the foundation of the whole culture and directly reflects a cultural reality[9]. The incorrect translation of culture-specific markers is one of the reasons for the obstacles in the target language readers' understanding[10]. In the context of English as the world's lingua franca, many people begin to think about how to translate Chinese culture-specific words into English, and the special meaning of Chinese culture-specific words increases the difficulty of translation and to some extent hinders the spread of culture to the outside world.

In this translation of *New Year's Sacrifice*, William A. Lyell annotates many culture-loaded words and related historical figures, such as "Fuli", "Jiansheng" and "Chen Tuan", which reflects the thickness of the translation. Thick translation enables foreign readers to have a clear understanding of the semantic content and cultural connotation of Chinese cultural terms while maintaining their national characteristics, so that they can accept and recognize them, and avoid such mistakes as unclear translation, mistranslation, omission of translation and loss of cultural factors caused by linguistic or cultural differences, that is, to achieve the highest level of translation: faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance. It weakens the strangeness and uncertainty of target language readers to Chinese culture and the cultural impact, presents the background of Chinese traditional culture, and promotes Chinese culture to go out.

4.3 Highlighting Translators' Subjectivity

Translation, as a necessary means of communication between Chinese and Western cultures, can help people overcome language barriers and bridge the cultural gap. Culture can only become a mirror through appropriate translation, reflecting the wisdom of a country and a nation's culture. As Wang Zongyan said, translation is reporting rather than creation, so the translator should (1) know what the original author is saying; (2) be able to express the original meaning accurately in another language, which is the primary task of translation[11].

William A. Lyell reshapes the historical and cultural context through non-translation materials such as preface, background introduction, footnotes and implicit notes, which is not only the simple transformation of language and writing, but also the transmission of culture, emotion and thought. The translator goes from behind the scenes to the front of the stage, maintaining a balance between the original work, translation and readers, and weakening the strangeness that readers feel when facing the translation text. It enables readers to understand the meaning of the original text in the social, historical and cultural background of the original text.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the English version of William A. Lyell's *New Year's Sacrifice* from the perspective of thick translation, and studies the application of thick translation in the translation version. The practical application of the thick translation, such as preface, pronunciation notes, footnotes and implicit notes, has the functions of breaking down reading barriers, explaining meanings, introducing background, and paving the way in depth. The thick translation provides a

valuable guiding principle for the translation of literary works and becomes one of the translation strategies to promote the "going out" of Chinese culture. After the analysis and exploration, the writer has come to realize that in the process of translation, a translator must elucidate the profound meanings, foster cultural dissemination, and assert his own subjectivity just like Lyell, and then a high-quality translation can be conducted.

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