
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Study on the Translation of Four-Character Structures in *Tao Hua Yuan Ji* from the Perspective of Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics

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| ABSTRACT

Tao Hua Yuan Ji, as a representative prose of ancient Jiangxi literature, its English translation has attracted much attention from Chinese academia. There are single translation version research and comparative studies of multiple versions all with different perspectives, but little attention is paid to the version of American Sinologist Hightower. The rich expressions of four-character structures is one of the noticeable features of the original text of *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*, but at present, there lacks study of its English translation, especially in-depth cognitive analysis. Therefore, starting from the Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics, guided by its kernel principle "Reality-Cognition-language", this paper explores the choices of Hightower's translation of four-character structures from the three levels of language, cognition and reality, and analyzes the translation-induced cognitive processes and their pragmatic effects when the rendition takes place on different levels. It is found that among the 33 four-character structures in the original text, Hightower chose 23 on the level of language, mainly using complete literal translation and the method of combining literal and liberal translation, and 10 on the levels of cognition and reality, adopting complete liberal translation and contextual liberal translation. Hightower's three-level choices of the translation of the four-character structures in *Tao Hua Yuan Ji* reflects the cognitive bases of embodied-cognition, namely universality, distinctness and deficiency.

| KEYWORDS

Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics, *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*, four-character structures, English translation, Hightower

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1. Introduction

Tao Hua Yuan Ji is the representative work of Tao Yuanming, a Jiangxi writer in the Eastern Jin Dynasty. It is also a classic prose in the literature of the Wei, Jin and Six Dynasties, which has unique charm and far-reaching influence in the history of Chinese literature. At present, there are more than ten different English translation versions of it, and many famous translators, such as Lin Yutang, Yang Xianyi, A. R. Davis and J. R. Hightower, take it as one of the models for the study and dissemination of Chinese culture and ancient Chinese literature. The English translation studies of it has always attracted the attention of the Chinese academia, with rich research achievements. Except for the study of single translation version, many domestic scholars have made comparative analysis of different English versions from multiple perspectives. However, through combing the literature, this paper finds that the current studies have paid little attention to the English version of American Sinologist Hightower, lacks the English translation study of its four-character structures, and lacks in-depth cognitive analysis. Therefore, this paper focuses on Hightower's version of *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*, guided by the kernel principle of "Reality-Cognition-Language" of the Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics, will explore Hightower's choices of the translation of the four-character structures on the three levels of language, cognition and reality, and analyze the translation-induced cognitive processes and pragmatic effects when the rendition takes place on different levels.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The English Translation Studies of *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*

Through sorting out the literature, this paper finds that there are few studies on the single translation version of *Tao Hua Yuan Ji* at home, and there is a lack of high-quality research findings. Xu Lei and Song Chang (2010) discussed the construction strategies of cultural schema and cultural transmission effect in the process of English translation by taking Lin Yutang's version as an example. Fan Wenjun and Peng Shiyu (2017) were guided by the theory of Translation Shift, explored the way of the equivalent of the English translation of Luo Jinguo's version from the aspects like hierarchy shift, structure shift and internal system shift.

In addition to the above single version studies, domestic scholars have the comparative orientation of the English versions of *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*, and have distinctive perspectives. For example, some scholars took the English translation versions of Lin Yutang and Davis as a comparative study on the two translations. Among them, Pu Pu and Hu Xianyao (2012) combined Toury's Descriptive Translation and the text analysis method from Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, compared the word operation routine of Davis' and Lin's translations from the quantitative analysis of text characteristics. Secondly, the comparative studies of three translation versions of *Tao Hua Yuan Ji* are also relatively common, among which the versions of Lin Yutang, Fang Zhong and Davis are mostly studied. For example, guided by Yan Fu's translation principle of "Xin, Da and Ya", Li Jiakun and Wang Lantian (2017) compared the different advantages of the above three versions in terms of cultural transmission effect, and further demonstrated that Yan's translation principle is highly compatible with Chinese language and cultural transmission. Moreover, there are also comparative studies of four versions and six versions, this paper will not be too much here.

Meanwhile, through the literature review, this paper finds that Chinese domestic scholars have paid little attention to the English translation of Hightower's version, whether in the single translation studies or in the comparative studies of multiple versions. However, American Sinologist Hightower has made outstanding contributions to the English translation of Tao Yuanming's poems, and his English translation of Tao's poems is called "The model of academic translation" by relevant scholars (Ma Songyi, 2024). Therefore, this paper selects Hightower's version of *Tao Hua Yuan Ji* for research, and systematically analyzes the choices of translation levels and cognitive processes of the English translation of the four-character structures, which has certain novelty and research value.

2.2 The English Translation Studies of Four-character Structures

As one of the unique language phenomena of Chinese, four-character structures largely exists in *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*, short in form, rich in content and far-reaching in significance. However, there is little research on the its English translation. At the same time, the unique structure, rhythm and cultural information carried by the four-character structures all brought great challenges to C-E translation. Therefore, to a large extent, the translation of it determines the overall translation effect of *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*. In the study of English translation of four-character structures, many domestic scholars have conducted extensive and in-depth discussion, and the research content is rich.

Liu Qihong (2008), based on Social Semiotics, explored the English translation of the four-character structures in *A Dream of Red Mansions* from the reference meaning, intraspeech meaning and pragmatic meaning, and pointed out that the translator's consideration of the semantics and functions of the four-character structures affect the loyalty and readability of the translation. Li Xin and Wang Yi (2013) believed that the conceptual metaphors in the four-character structures lead the difficulty of English translation. They explored the English translation strategy of the conceptual metaphors of the four-character structures in the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*, and found that it realized the loyalty of the translation to a large extent. Cui Qiqi et al. (2023) explored the promoting role of translation aesthetics on the translation of the four-character structures of Traditional Chinese Medicine based on the construction of a one-to-many TCM four-character structures translation corpus. Secondly, some scholars have discussed the classification of four-character structures in their translation studies. For example, Yang Qingping (2007) believes that the four-character structures includes four-character idioms and ordinary four-character phrases, in which the wording of ordinary four-word phrases can be fixed or self-drawn. Kong Delu and Zhang Jidong (2022), based on the four-character classification studies by Yao Dianfang and Ma Guofan, divided the four-character structures into fixed idioms and four-character phrases that reflect the rhyme features of the four-character form.

3. Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics and Translation Studies

Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) founded the Theory of Experiential Philosophy, which became the philosophical basis of Cognitive Linguistics with the name of the "third path" in philosophy. With his keen insight, Professor Wang Yin, a Chinese scholar, realized the defects of the philosophical basis of western Cognitive Linguistics, and proposed the Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics (for short, ECL), highlighting the "Materialism (Embodiment)" and "Humanism (Cognition)" of language research (Jia Juan, Peng Zhibin, 2020: 33). ECL emphasizes the experience and practicality of language, and believes that the "experiential interaction" and "cognitive processing" of reality are the sources of language formation. Wang Yin (2014: 61, 63) pointed out that experience is the foundation of cognition, without experience, there is no cognition; cognition is the sublimation of experience, without cognition, human

language cannot be formed. The embodied-cognitive principle of the “Reality-Cognition-Language” is the kernel principle of ECL, which reflects that language expression varies from person to person, time to time, and place to place (Wang Yin, 2014: 62). That is to say, the differences in language expressions are the most intuitive reflection of the differences in experience and cognitive differences among different ethnic groups. Therefore, in the process of translation, ECL not only emphasizes the language transformation, but also pays more attention to the cognition processes behind translation itself (Wang Yin, 2020: 38).

As a new interdisciplinary theory, Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics has achieved a lot of high-quality research fruits in the field of translation studies, with strong application and explanatory power. Starting from the principle of “Reality-Cognition-Language”, Wang Yin (2019) compared and analyzed the translation modes and effects of the idioms in the three English translation versions of *A Dream in Red Mansions*, and put forward the three-level view and specific translation methods of the Chinese idioms. Gao Wencheng and Wu Chaoyi (2021) introduced the above three-level translation view into the English translation study of Chinese culture-loaded words for the first time, analyzed Hawkes’ embodied-cognitive operations of the culture-loaded words of *Li Sao*, and verified the applicability of the three-level view of ECL from idiom translation in the study of English translation of Chinese culture-loaded words. Li Ying and Yang Yunjie (2022) combined the Embodied-Cognitive Linguistics and Cognitive Metaphor Theory, took the English version of Tang poetry translated by Xu Yuanchong as an example, and made embodied-cognitive analysis of the its translation features, which further confirmed the wide applicability of the three-level view of idiom translation. Moreover, in addition to the application research of translation, some scholars have done the theoretical exploration of ECL and translation. For example, Li Jingshu (2022) conducted the multi-dimensional concreteness study of the translator’s body, based on the principles of embodied-cognition and concrete-scene of ECL, and discussed the translation mechanism and related strategies under the paradigm of embodied-cognition of translation. To sum up, this paper will further expand the research object of ECL and explore the applicability of the three-level principle of Chinese idiom translation in the study of the English translation of four-character structures.

4. The Embodied-Cognitive Analysis of the English Translation of the Four-character Structures

Information conversion at the language level is the basis of translation, but the cognitive mechanism behind it and the corresponding real world can not be ignored. Wang Yin (2019: 157) pointed out that in the translation activities, the translator can find the corresponding cognitive meaning, including prototype, connotation and concept in accordance with the original literal meaning and context. Meanwhile, the translator can also imagine the reality of the original scene. Therefore, the translation activity involves the three levels of “Reality, Cognition, Language”. The three-level view can be used as the main basis for translators to choose translation, and they can choose one, or consider combining cognition with language or reality (Wang Yin, 2019). Based on this ECL view of Chinese idioms, this paper will explore the English translation of 33 four-character structures in *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*, and discuss the translation methods, cognitive processes and pragmatic effects of Hightower’s version at all levels.

4.1 On the Level of Language

The universality of cognition makes the language expressions have certain similarity, so it is the choice of most translators to translate literally according to the literal meaning. The choice of language level in the three-level view refers to translating the literal meaning of the original text and intuitively convey the language features of the original text, which is the most basic task of the translator. From the perspective of embodied-cognitive operation mode, the choice of translation at the language level can retain the image of the original text to a large extent, so that the translation can have the style of the original text and there has more foreignization. Target language readers can feel the features of foreign cultures and then understand the differences (Wang Yin, 2019: 157). Among the 33 four-character structures in *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*, Hightower chose 23 translations on the language level, mainly using three specific translation methods, namely, the complete literal translation (10), the partial literal translation (4), and the combination of literal and liberal translation (9).

4.1.1 Complete Literal Translation

Complete literal translation refers to the literal translation of the four character structures in accordance with the literal meaning of the original text to completely convey the literal information of the original text. For instance:

Example 1: 山有小口，仿佛若有光。

There was a small opening in the mountain and it seemed as though light was coming through it. (translated by Hightower)

Example 2: 有良田美池桑竹之属。

... were surrounded by rich fields and pretty ponds. (translated by Hightower)

Example 3: 问今是何世，乃不知有汉，无论魏晋。

They asked what the present ruling dynasty was, for they had never heard of the Han, let alone the Wei and the Jin. (translated by Hightower)

In example 1, the literal meaning of the four-character expression “山有小口” is completely translated into “a small opening in the mountain”, which shows that the Chinese and Western peoples have the similar cognition of “山”, and can construct the image of “山有小口” in their brains. Meanwhile, “口” has a certain ambiguity, so Hightower chose to use the abstract noun “opening” for literal translation, retaining the ambiguity of the original text with abstraction. Therefore, a complete literal translation of loyalty to the original text is sufficient to meet the understanding needs of the native English language readers. In example 2, “良田美池” is the most direct observation and experience of ancient Chinese ancestors on life practice. The translation “rich fields and pretty ponds” is consistent with the same meaning of the original text and the similar structure, reproducing the literary color of the original text. The complete transmission of the original information also reflects the universal features of the Chinese and English peoples. Example 3 is Hightower’s choice of transliteration on the language level. The transliteration of Chinese pinyin is used to translate “魏” and “晋” in the four-character structure “无论魏晋” into “the Wei” and “the Jin”, retaining the abstraction and structural features of the original text, input the language form of Chinese nation into English, and realizing the translation purpose of enriching English expression.

4.1.2 Partial Literal Translation

Partial literal translation refers to the translation of only some words of the four-character structures in *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*, and some information of the original text is omitted. For instance:

Example 4: 落英缤纷

... and fallen petals covered the ground. (translated by Hightower)

Example 5: 屋舍俨然

... where well-built houses were surrounded by rich fields and pretty ponds. (translated by Hightower)

In the four-character structure in example 4, “落英” refers to “fallen flowers”, and “缤纷” refers to “the state of many flower petals flap in the wind.”. Hightower translated this four-character structure into “fallen petals”, which only translated “落英” and omitted “缤纷”. This is because “fallen petals” itself can also reflect the feeling of petals falling in the wind, which reduces redundancy, and native English readers do not have to pay too much cognitive efforts to construct the original beauty in their brain. The four-character structure in example 5 “俨然” describes the “the orderly state” of the houses in *Tao Hua Yuan*. “屋舍” is projected clearly in the translation, translated as “houses”, reflecting the universal features of cognition. However, “俨然” is not directly reflected in the translation, which is implied in “well-build”, which expands the semantic meaning of the original text to some extent, because “整齐” is only the one aspect of “well-build”. In general, partial literal translation is less used for the English translation of the four-character structures in *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*. Using this halved translation method, although the original meaning can be basically conveyed, it weakens the expressiveness of these special structures.

4.1.3 Combining Literal and Liberal Translation

In the English translation of the four-character structures in *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*, Hightower has more often adopted the fusion paradigm of combining literal and liberal translation. This is because some of these four-character structures are difficult to meet the understanding needs of the target language readers only by the literal meaning, so the translator has done partial literal translation and partial liberal translation of them by combing the language level and the cognitive level. For instance:

Example 6: 晋太元中，武陵人捕鱼为业。

During the Tai-yuan period of the China dynasty, a fisherman of Wu-ling once rowed upstream, ... (translated by Hightower)

Example 7: 便要还家，设酒杀鸡作食。

... and was invited to go to their house, where he was served wine while they killed a chicken for a feast. (translated by Hightower)

In example 6, the four-character case “晋太元中” involves the expressions of the year number of ancient Chinese dynasties, which is difficult to translate. Hightower chose to translate “太元” into “Tai-yuan” in Chinese pinyin, and input the language form of the Chinese nation into the translation, which obtained the characteristics of foreignization. However, He also conducted a cognitive operation, translating “晋” to “China dynasty”, rather than translating “Jin”, native English speakers can understand this background

information more easily and have better language effect. Example 7 is a non-subject sentence. Multiple verbs appear in the two four-character structures “便要还家” and “设酒杀鸡”, reflecting the dynamic features of Chinese language. Hightower translated “还家”, “酒” and “杀鸡” into “go to their house”, “wine” and “killed a chicken” respectively. The conceptual meanings of the two four-character structures have been well preserved in the translation. However, “要” and “设” are translated as passive form “was invited” and “was served” respectively, which reflects the passive orientation of English and is more in line with the pragmatic habits of native English speakers. Meanwhile, the passive intervention also changes the object position of the original fisherman to the main position in the translation.

4.2 On the Level of Cognition

According to the kernel principle of ECL, “human cognition” is the only way to “real world” and “language expression” (Wang Yin, 2019: 158). The formation process of Chinese four-character structures is also a process of “cognitive processing”, so it is feasible to translate according to the cognitive level. Wang Yin (2019: 161) pointed out that the literal meaning of translation is the carrier of transmitting cognitive meaning, and the archetypal cognitive meaning expressed in the original translation is the core of idiom understanding, which belongs to the method of liberal translation. The cognitive meaning of translation prototype is an activity at the cognitive level, which is different from the choice at the language level. This translation activity emphasizes that the translator breaks free from the bondage of the four-character’s original image, deeply understands the core content of the original text, and interprets the original meaning and connotation meaning. However, translators need to make more cognitive efforts to achieve the accurate transmission of the semantic features of the original text (Wang Yin, 2019: 158). Therefore, Hightower seldom chose this aspect in the English translation of *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*, with four in total, all of which are fully liberal translation.

4.2.1 Complete Liberal Translation

Complete liberal translation refers to the translator can get rid of the literal meaning of the original text and further translate the original cognitive meaning and connotative meaning in the translation process of the four-character structures in *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*. For instance:

Example 8: 黄发垂髻，并怡然自乐。

Old men and boys were carefree and happy. (translated by Hightower)

Example 9: 见渔人，乃大惊，问所从来。

When they caught sight of the fisherman, they asked in surprise how he had got there. (translated by Hightower)

In example 8, the four-character structure “黄发垂髻” is rich in connotation and reflects the unique cognition of the Chinese nation. “黄发” refers to “the old people” and “垂髻” refers to “kids” metonymically. Hightower completely translated it as “Old men and boys”, which narrowed the semantic meaning of the original text, abandoned the images in the four-character structure, and reduced the cognitive processing burden of native English speakers. They can directly obtain its cognitive meaning without the need for cross-domain cognitive operations. If “黄发垂髻” are literally translated into “Yellow hair and drooping hair”, the translation will only become obscure. Therefore, the complete liberal translation method is adopted here to avoid the misunderstanding caused by the lack of understanding of native English speakers, reduce the difficulty of reading and simplify the cognitive path of readers. In example 9, the four-character structure “问所从来” is a Chinese sentence of omitted object. The original sentence should be “问之所从来”, and the literal translation is “asked where had he come from”, while Hightower completely liberal translated it as “asked ... how he had got there”, almost completely getting rid of the literal meaning of the original text, highlighting the results of the fisherman’s visit to Tao Hua Yuan, and reflecting the embodied-cognitive difference between the Chinese and English nationalities. The above two cases vividly reflect that the Chinese and English peoples have different concepts of embodied-cognition due to the differences like in historical and cultural factors, and the complete liberal translation of the cognitive level also shows that the Chinese and English peoples have the distinctive feature of embodied-cognition.

4.3 On the Level of Reality

Objective reality and life experience are the source of Chinese four-character structures, and the use of them is inseparable from the real world and real scene. Wang Yin (2019: 158) pointed out that the use of idioms cannot be separated from the context, and the process of understanding idioms for translators is a process of the interaction between the meaning of idioms and the reality of context. Therefore, in the process of translation of the four-character structures, from the literal meaning to the prototypical cognitive meaning, and then to the contextual meaning, the translation activities have realized the transformation to the reality level. Reality level of translation activity requires translators more cognitive processing, the translator needs to fully understand

the literal meaning and cognitive meaning, again from the pragmatic perspective, combines the real context and real scene, so, based on the reality level, the contextual liberal translation can more accurately convey the original pragmatic meaning (Wang Yin, 2019: 158). In the translation the four-character structures in *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*, Hightower also rarely chose this level, and a total of six adopted the method of contextual liberal translation.

4.3.1 Contextual Liberal Translation

Contextual liberal translation refers to put forward the literal and archetypal meaning to the reality level and further translate the pragmatic meaning in the translation process of the four-character structures in *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*. For instance:

Example 10: 不复出焉，遂与外人间隔。

... had never ventured out again consequently they had lost all contact with the outside world. (translated by Hightower)

Example 11: 遂迷，不复得路。

... but went astray and were unable to find the cave again. (translated by Hightower)

In example 10, “不复出焉” refers to “no longer go out”, which means that the people have never left Tao Hua Yuan again. Hightower did not choose the literal translation on the language level and the liberal translation on the cognition level, but in a deep understanding of the villagers’ “不复出焉”, combined the realistic context, translated it into “had never ventured out again”, shows the villagers there dare not leave because of avoiding the chaos of the Qin dynasty, the pragmatic effect is better. In example 11, “不复得路” refers to “haven’t found the way”, which means that the Prefecture and others did not find the way to Tao Hua Yuan. The original text tends to state the facts, while Hightower’s translation with “were unable to...” tends to translate the initiative of these people. Meanwhile, the search for “路” (road) reflects the process feature of the original text, while Hightower translated “路” into “cave” to make the translation more result-oriented. This shows that Hightower’s insight into the realistic context of the original text, which echoes the translation with the previous “山有小口”. What the Prefecture and others really want to look for is the entrance to Tao Hua Yuan, and the meaning of “不复得路” has long been implied in “遂迷” (went astray). Both of the above two cases provide enough information and clearer expression, which compensates for the lack of the native English readers, reflecting the feature of deficiency of embodied-cognition.

5. Conclusion

This paper focused on *Tao Hua Yuan Ji* translated by the American Sinologist Hightower, guided by the ECL kernel principle of “Reality-Cognition-Language”, expanded the research object of the three-level view of Chinese idiom translation from idioms to four-character structures. It explored Hightower’s choices of language, cognition and reality for the English translation of the four-character structures in *Tao Hua Yuan Ji*, analyzed the cognitive processes and pragmatic effects, and explained the important role of choosing translation levels on translation quality. It is found that among the 33 four-character structures in the original text, Hightower chose 23 on the language level, among which mainly adopted the translation methods of complete literal translation, partial literal translation and combining literal and liberal translation, which reflects the universality of embodied-cognition, and 10 on the cognition and reality levels, which adopted the translation methods of complete liberal translation and contextual liberal translation, reflecting the distinctness and deficiency of embodied-cognition respectively. The Chinese four-character structures has a unique form and rich connotations. Therefore, in the process of its English translation, from the perspective of ECL, it can help the translator to choose the appropriate translation level and achieve better translation effect, so as to promote the international dissemination of traditional Chinese literature.

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