

RECONSTRUCTION OF CHARACTER IMAGES IN TRANSLATED LITERARY WORKS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MEDIO-TRANSLATOLOGY: A CASE STUDY OF THE CHINESE VERSION OF TWO YEARS' VACATION

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Abstract: The construction of character images in translated literary works directly influences whether the translation can successfully integrate into the target language's cultural system, thus facilitating effective cross-cultural communication. This paper, from the theoretical perspective of Medio-translatology, takes the sole female character in the French novel *The Two Years' Vacation* as a focal point, analyzing the rewriting of her character in the Chinese version and exploring the underlying reasons for such changes. Through this analysis, the paper aims to provide new perspectives and insights for the translation of literary works and cross-cultural exchange.

Keywords: Translated literature; Character image reconstruction; Medio-translatology; *Two Years' Vacation*

1 INTRODUCTION

The French writer Jules Verne is renowned for his unique imagination of science, exploration, and the future in his literary works. His books have been translated into numerous languages and are popular worldwide. The *Two Years' Vacation* (*Deux ans de vacances*) is an adventure novel published by Verne in 1888. The novel, with its captivating storyline and profound character portrayals, tells the story of a group of students from France who, while traveling across the Pacific, are forced to survive on a deserted island after being struck by a sudden storm. The *Two Years' Vacation* was translated into Chinese in the early 20th century by Liang Qichao and Luo Pu, making its debut to Chinese readers. The first ten chapters were translated by Liang Qichao, while the remaining eight chapters were translated by Luo Pu. The Chinese version was titled *Fifteen Little Heroes*, which caused a strong reaction in society at the time. After its release in 1902, the novel was repeatedly reprinted, and by 1930, the Shanghai Bookstore had issued the fifth edition. "... The young Zhou Zuoren, before beginning his literary activities, was a youth profoundly moved by *Xinmin Congbao* and *Fifteen Little Heroes*..."[1] As a representative work of French adventure novels, *Fifteen Little Heroes* has attracted scholarly attention. Current research on this work mainly focuses on the translation strategies chosen by the translators and, through analysis of the translated text, explores the translators' purposes. For example, Yao Dadui, from the perspective of comparative literature, has deeply analyzed the phenomenon of inserting political discourse and removing colonial discourse in the translation version;[2] Wang Jin'an and others, using the theory of translation purpose, have elaborated on the characteristics of the target-language readers reflected in the novel.[3] Novels are a narrative literary genre centered on the creation of characters. The portrayal of characters is an important path through which both the author and the translator realize their creative intentions. In a sense, the success or failure of creating typical characters determines the success or failure of the work.[4] However, existing research has rarely treated the translated work as an independent entity. There is little comparison of how character images are shaped in the Chinese translation versus the original French text, how translators have reshaped the characters during the translation process, and which factors influence the reshaping of characters' images. This article, starting from the theory of Medio-translatology, focuses on the only female character (Kate) in the French novel *Two Years' Vacation*. It analyzes the differences in the portrayal of this character between the original French version and the Chinese version translated by Liang and Luo. It also explores the social and cultural reasons behind the translators' re-shaping of Kate's character image, and, by doing so, discusses the social attributes and social value of translated literary works. This approach aims to facilitate the entry of literary works into the target-language cultural system, thus enabling effective cross-cultural communication.

2 RECONSTRUCTION OF CHARACTER IMAGES IN TRANSLATED LITERARY WORKS

Translation broadens the scope of literary works' dissemination and promotes interaction and exchange between different languages and cultures. "The so-called foreign literary works that Chinese readers generally read are, in fact, foreign literature translated by Chinese translators, that is, 'translated literature.' It is clearly a new work independent of the original, derived from the original, but by no means identical to it..."[5] Literary works often focus on the creation of character images, reflecting social life through narrative plot and environmental descriptions. Translating literary works requires translators to possess deep literacy in language, culture, and literature to ensure that the target audience can experience the most faithful representation of the original. Among these, the reshaping of character images by the translator can significantly affect the transmission and reception of the translated work in the target language world. As

an independent literary work, the character images in a translated work also undergo a journey across languages and cultures, facilitated by the bridge built by the translator. In this process, what changes occur in the portrayal of characters, why these changes happen, and what impact they have are important issues for comparative literature and cultural studies to address. This also aligns with what later people referred to as the “cultural turn”[6] in translation studies, and “liberated the discipline of translation from the limitations of previous theories.”[7] Professor Xie Tianzhen steps beyond the linguistic aspects of translation studies and proposes a theory of Medio-translatology with a focus on literary or cultural research. “Medio-translatology involves a descriptive study of translated works, not concerned with evaluating the quality of translations, nor passing judgment on their merits. Instead, it treats the translated work as a given fact and then explores and analyzes the issues of literary exchange, influence, dissemination, and reception on this basis.”[8] “Creative rebellion” is a fundamental concept in Medio-translatology, which includes the creative rebellion of the translator, the creative rebellion of the receiver, and the creative rebellion of the reception environment. Among these, “the creative rebellion of the translator takes precedence, referring to the various ‘rewriting’ actions the translator might take under the constraints of translation norms, such as translation concepts and the translation environment.”[9] “Creative rebellion is an objective phenomenon in translation, revealing a rule in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication and reception. It helps us to understand more profoundly the essence of translation.”[10] The adventure novel *Two Years’ Vacation* by Jules Verne features fifteen young boys as the main characters, with the only female character, Kate, appearing outside of this group of boys. By comparing the original French version of the novel with the Chinese version translated by Liang and Luo, it becomes evident that the translator significantly reworked and reshaped the character of Kate. Changes can be observed in her age, identity, and fate, with notable alterations. Kate, having crossed the seas from France to China, had already assumed an entirely new identity.

3 RECONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN CHINESE VERSION OF *TWO YEARS’ VACATION*

3.1 From a Middle-Aged Woman to a Young and Beautiful Girl

In the original French version of the novel, Kate officially appears in Chapter 22. The protagonist, Briant, discovers Kate, who is on the brink of death, while searching for his friends who had left due to disagreements. “Une femme était étendue là, immobile comme unemorte, une femme dont les vêtements – jupe de grosseétoffe, corsage pareil, châle de laine brune, noué à saccature – paraissaient encore en assez bon état. Safigure portait des traces d’excèsives souffrances, bienqu’elle fût de constitution robuste, n’étant d’ailleursâgée que de quarante à quarante-cinq ans. Épuisée defatigues, de faim peut-être, elle avait perduconnaissance, mais un léger souffle s’exhalait de sèslèvres.”[11] (A woman lay there, motionless like a dead person, a woman whose clothes—a heavy fabric skirt, a matching bodice, a brown wool shawl tied at her waist—still appeared to be in fairly good condition. Her face bore traces of extreme suffering, although she was of robust constitution, being only around forty to forty-five years old. Exhausted from fatigue, perhaps from hunger, she had lost consciousness, but a faint breath escaped from her lips.—Translated by the author). In Chapter 13 of the Chinese version, Kate appears: “The lifeless body was dressed in luxurious clothes, with a half-cloak draped over her shoulders. Although her complexion was pale and her face showed traces of sorrow, she was a stunning beauty, a flawless sixteen-year-old girl.”[12] As can be seen, in the original French version, Kate is a middle-aged woman in her forties or fifties. She is described as being sturdy in build, dressed simply, and there is little detail given about her appearance, other than a mention of her painful expression. However, in the Chinese version, the translator reimagines her as a sixteen-year-old girl, dressed in luxurious clothing, and particularly emphasizes that she is a very beautiful young woman.

3.2 From a Maid to a Student

In the French original, after being rescued by the boys, Kate recounts her background: “Elle était d’origine américaine, avait longtemps vécu sur les territoires du Far-West aux États-Unis. Elle senommait Catherine Ready, ou plus simplement Kate. Depuis plus de vingt ans, elle remplissait les fonctions de femme de confiance, au service de la familleWilliam R. Penfield, qui habitait Albany, capitale del’État de New York.”[11] (She was of American origin and had lived for a long time in the territories of the Far West in the United States. Her name was Catherine Ready, or more simply, Kate. For over twenty years, she had served as a trusted woman in the service of the William R. Penfield family, who lived in Albany, the capital of the state of New York.—Translated by the author). From the above, it is clear that Kate’s profession is that of a servant. However, in the Chinese version, Chapter 14, the translator reimagines her as an educated student: “The boys carefully inquired about her background and learned that her name was Jia Zhilan... She had been studying for a long time in the capital of New York.”[12]

3.3 From a Caring Mother to An Romantic Partner

In Jules Verne’s original, Kate is portrayed as a maternal figure to the fifteen boys stranded on the island. After meeting the children, she takes on the responsibility of caring for them. Not only does she help them find food on the island, but she also offers them nurturing, motherly affection. For example, in Chapter 22, after Kate is rescued and learns of the boys’ plight, it is written: “L’excellente femme ne pensait plus à elle pour nepenser qu’à eux. S’ils devaient rester ensemble sur l’île Chairman, elle serait leur servante dévouée, elle les soignerait, elle les aimerait comme une mère.”[11] (The excellent woman no longer thought of herself, but only of them. If they were to remain together on Chairman

Island, she would be their devoted servant, she would care for them, she would love them as a mother. -Translated by the author). And in Chapter 23, it is further described: “l’excellente créature avait reporté sur les plus jeunes enfants de la colonie tout ce que son cœur contenait de tendresses maternelles, et jamais elle ne leur marchandait ses caresses.”[11] (The excellent woman had transferred to the younger children of the colony all the tenderness that her heart contained, and never withheld her affection from them. -Translated by the author). Additionally, at the end of the French novel, after Kate and the fifteen boys escape the island and return to New Zealand, the children treat her as a member of their family: “elle fut réclamée, 609 disputée, par les Briant, les Garnett, les Wilcox et bien d’autres. Finalement, elle se fixa dans la maison de Doniphan, dont elle avait sauvé la vie par ses soins.”[11] (She was claimed, contested over, by the Briants, the Garnetts, the Wilcoxes, and many others. Finally, she settled in the house of Doniphan, whose life she had saved with her care. -Translated by the author). However, in the Chinese version, the translator alters Kate’s maternal role and transforms her character into a romantic figure. She develops a love story with one of the main characters, a young boy named Duban. Due to Duban’s injury, Kate is responsible for his care: “...Therefore, while taking care of Duban, Kate felt an infinite sympathy and affection for him, truly considerate in every way. For a whole month, she never left Duban’s sickbed. Duban also felt her deep affection, and after returning to their homeland, the two eventually became a couple...”[12] By comparing the French and Chinese versions, it can be seen that Kate’s character undergoes significant changes in terms of age, appearance, identity, and fate. For details, refer to Table 1.

Table 1 Comparison of Kate’s Character Traits in the French and Chinese Versions

Kate’s character traits	French version	Chinese version
Age	Forty to fifty years old	Sixteen years old
Appearance	Not mentioned	Beautiful
Style of dress	Dressed simply	Luxurious clothing
Identity	Maid	Student
Fate	Family member	Romantic partner

4 REASONS FOR THE RECONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN CHINESE VERSION OF *TWO YEARS’ VACATION*

4.1. Adaptation to Traditional Novel Genres

During the Late Qing period, traditional Chinese novels were still primarily based on stories of “talented scholars and beautiful women.” In classical Chinese literature, this type of narrative—focused on the talented scholar and the beautiful woman—was a very common literary tradition. The “talented scholar” is typically portrayed as a person with profound knowledge and quick wit, while the “beautiful woman” is often depicted as not only physically beautiful but also gentle, wise, and virtuous. The connection between the two characters is not just physical but also intellectual and cultural, reflecting a deep compatibility in spirit and taste. These stories often carry a strong cultural and intellectual background, embodying the scholarly class’s admiration for knowledge, talent, and moral integrity. The “talented scholar” in these novels represents the cultural elite and an idealized male figure, while the “beautiful woman” symbolizes an elegant, virtuous, and beautiful female ideal. From an artistic creation perspective, presenting the female character as a “beautiful woman” serves to heighten the drama and appeal of the narrative. Traditional Chinese novels emphasize emotional expression, and the image of the “beautiful woman” is often a key driver of conflict and tension in the plot. Through the portrayal of the female character’s beauty and emotional depth, the storyline is propelled forward. In *Two Years’ Vacation*, the main characters are fifteen brave, intelligent boys, which aligns with the traditional elements of the “talented scholar” genre. However, as the only female character in the novel, Kate’s original portrayal as a middle-aged woman does not fit the traditional expectations of the genre, nor does it align with the cultural conventions of such novels. This would diminish the narrative tension and dramatic conflict in the story, especially in a translation intended to appeal to readers familiar with traditional Chinese novels. Consequently, the translator reimagined Kate’s character, transforming her from a middle-aged woman into a beautiful young girl, ultimately becoming an ideal companion for one of the boys. This reshaping of Kate’s character reflects the translator’s adaptation to the literary conventions of Late Qing period fiction and the desire to maintain the traditional appeal and dynamics of “talented scholar and beautiful woman” narratives.

4.2 Adaptation to the Audience and Mode of Dissemination

The translation of literary works is often adjusted according to the needs of the target audience. The intended readership of the Chinese version of *Two Years’ Vacation* primarily consisted of male intellectuals during the late Qing Dynasty. This group had high expectations for literary works, particularly in terms of character development and plot construction. They were more inclined to appreciate dramatic elements, emotional conflict, and social symbolism. In this context, the translator’s adaptation of female characters became one of the key factors that contributed to the appeal

of the translated text. In the original version, Kate is portrayed as a middle-aged woman; however, in the translation, the translator reimagines her as a beautiful girl and even incorporates a romantic subplot involving the protagonist. This adaptation reflects the translator's deep understanding of the target audience and their preferences. The male intellectuals of the late Qing Dynasty were not only concerned with the philosophical content of the work, but also with the emotional resonance and the attractiveness of the characters. By youthfulizing Kate's character and introducing a romantic element, the translator catered to the readers' preference for romantic plots and idealized female figures, further enhancing the readability and emotional appeal of the translation. Although this alteration deviated from the original characterization, it was a strategic decision based on considerations of the translation's dissemination and acceptance within a new cultural and social context. The goal was to ensure that the translated version would attract broader attention and recognition in its new environment. Additionally, the translation was initially serialized in the newspaper *Xinmin Congbao*. The serial format of publication posed specific demands on the structuring of the story's plot. The serial format required frequent reading and sustained attention from the audience, compelling the translator to focus on maintaining tension and suspense in the narrative to keep readers engaged. In this mode of dissemination, the translated version needed to be structured in a way that ensured strong readability and dramatic appeal in order to retain the audience's interest and enhance the work's dissemination effect.

4.3 Translation Purpose of the Translator

As a leading figure in the late Qing Dynasty's reform movement, Liang Qichao's translation philosophy and practice were always aimed at guiding China toward national strength through reforms. "His translation activities and ideas are closely linked with his reformist, improvement-oriented, and patriotic endeavors." [5] As Liang Qichao's student, Luo Pu similarly attached great importance to the social function of novels, advocating the use of literature to promote social reform and cultivate a "new citizen" with independent thinking, adventurous spirit, and the capacity for self-governance, who would take on the responsibility of national revival. This vision is most clearly embodied in his reimagining of the "new woman" in his translations. Under the traditional male-centered worldview, women's education and development had long been neglected. Luo Pu, however, reinterprets Kate's role from that of a maidservant in the original text to a female student in the Chinese version. This change not only critiques and rebels against traditional educational values but also conveys a translation purpose that hopes for women to receive modern education and develop an independent, upward-oriented spirit. Moreover, the storyline involving free love in the Chinese version also reflects the translator's breakthrough and transcendence of traditional views on marriage. In traditional Chinese culture, women's marriage choices were almost entirely subject to family arrangements. By introducing a free-love subplot, the translator grants women the right to choose their own partners, advocating for women's freedom in marriage as part of the "new citizen" ideology. This plot not only overturns the traditional arranged marriage system but also embodies respect for women's individual will and freedom. Through the creation of an independent and self-determined "new woman" character, the translation guides the awakening of contemporary women and promotes their autonomy and status in social, marital, and familial contexts. On this level, Kate's reimagined character not only aligns with Luo Pu's educational vision for the "new citizen," but also reflects his deep concern and hopes for the enhancement of Chinese women's social standing.

5 CONCLUSION

The translation of literary works is not merely a linguistic conversion; it is a deep adaptation to the target culture, the needs of readers, and the translator's motivation. In this process, the characters in the original work often undergo rewriting and reshaping. In *Two Years' Vacation*, Kate, the only female character, undergoes significant transformations in her age, appearance, social status, and even fate upon moving from France to China. This shift reflects not only the translator's "creative rebellion" but also the cumulative influence of the target culture's social and cultural factors. From the perspective of translated Literature, although the rewriting of the character diverges from the original, it gives new life to the original text within the target culture and fosters the exchange and interaction between different social and cultural contexts. Therefore, literary translation is not just a reproduction of the text but also a process of cross-cultural understanding and creative transformation.

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