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A Comparative Study between Chinese and Western Dragon from the Cross-Cultural Communication Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The dragon is a significant cultural symbol in both Chinese and Western traditions, yet its connotations and societal perceptions differ greatly. In Chinese culture, the dragon represents power, auspiciousness, nobility, and wisdom, serving as a national totem closely associated with imperial authority, prosperity, and good fortune. In contrast, Western culture often portrays the dragon as a symbol of evil, greed, and destruction, frequently depicted as a creature to be defeated by heroes. From an intercultural communication perspective, this study conducts a comparative analysis of the symbolic meanings of dragons in Chinese and Western cultures, examining their representations in language, literature, and art. It also explores the impact of these differences on cross-cultural interactions, especially in translation to enhance mutual understanding across cultural boundaries.

1. Introduction

With the increasing frequency of international exchanges, intercultural communication activities among people from different cultural backgrounds are also growing. Intercultural communication refers to “communication between native and non-native speakers, as well as interactions between people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds”(Hu Wenzhong, 1999). It is one of the major challenges faced by contemporary human society, as intercultural communication fosters mutual understanding, collective progress among people of different nations, and contributes to the harmonious development of human society. However, when individuals from different cultural backgrounds communicate, cultural differences often create unexpected obstacles, leading to misunderstandings,

confusion, or even conflicts. Therefore, in intercultural communication, it is crucial to recognize the significance of cultural background knowledge and to prioritize the accurate understanding and dissemination of culture. The following discussion will compare the differences in dragon symbolism between Chinese and Western cultures to illustrate the importance of culture in intercultural communication and translation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Definition of Intercultural Communication

Intercultural Communication refers to the process of information exchange, mutual understanding and adapta-

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Du Shixian (born 1999), a female Han Chinese scholar from Anshun, Guizhou Province, holds a master's degree in Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics.

tion of people from different cultural backgrounds in the process of communication. According to Samovar, Porter and McDaniel(2012), intercultural communication refers to the interaction between members of different cultural groups, which includes the exchange of language, nonverbal behaviors, and cultural values. This type of communication emphasizes the impact of cultural backgrounds on communication styles. Hall(1976) defined intercultural communication as the transmission and understanding of information between people from different cultural backgrounds, influenced by high-context and low-context cultures. And Chinese scholar Hu Wenzhong(1999) defined that intercultural communication refers to interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds, including exchanges in language, ways of thinking, values, customs, and traditions. Jia Yuxin (2009) also put forward that intercultural communication refers to communication activities that take place between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, encompassing both verbal and nonverbal communication. Among these, cultural factors play a decisive role in the success or failure of communication.

2.2 The Symbolic Meanings of Dragon in Chinese and Western Cultures

Regarding the symbolic meanings of dragon, both domestic and international studies generally recognize that their cultural imagery differs significantly between China and the West. Wang Jing (2015) pointed out that in Chinese culture, the dragon symbolizes imperial power, auspiciousness, wisdom, and strength, and it is endowed with a sacred status. For example, the phrase “LONG DE CHUAN REN” expresses the national identity of the Chinese people. In contrast, in Western culture, dragon frequently appears in Christian mythology and legends, such as the seven-headed dragon in *The Bible* and the story of *Saint George and the Dragon*, where dragons are depicted as symbols of evil and violence. Kirkpatrick (2007), in his study of British and American literature, noted that dragons in Western literary works are often portrayed as enemies to be vanquished by heroes, such as Smaug in *The Hobbit*. Meanwhile, in ancient Chinese folklore, dragons are typically depicted as auspicious creatures, such as “LONG WANG” in *Journey to the West*.

2.3 Linguistic Expressions and Challenges in Translation

In terms of linguistic expressions, there are significant differences between Chinese and Western cultures regarding the word “dragon” and its extended meanings.

In Chinese, the character “LONG” frequently appears in idioms such as “LONG TENG HU YUE” and “WANG ZI CHENG LONG”, both of which carry positive connotations. In contrast, the English word “dragon” is often associated with negative meanings, as seen in phrases like “slay the dragon”, which metaphorically refers to defeating evil. Zhao Hui (2018), in his study on Chinese-English translation, pointed out that due to the differing symbolic meanings of “dragon” in Chinese and Western cultures, translators must pay special attention to its cultural connotations. For instance, in literary translation, directly translating the Chinese phrase “LONG FENG CHENG XIANG” as “dragon and phoenix bring prosperity” may cause misunderstanding among Western readers. Therefore, a domestication strategy is recommended, adapting it to “a harmonious and prosperous union” to better align with the target audience’s cultural understanding.

Furthermore, misunderstandings in intercultural communication are also influenced by the cultural differences. Chen and Starosta (1998) suggested that the misinterpretation of cultural symbols could lead to intercultural conflicts. For example, while Chinese people take pride in being the “LONG DE CHUAN REN”, foreigners may misinterpret this phrase due to the negative connotations associated with the word “dragon” in their culture. Therefore, accurately conveying the cultural connotation of the “dragon” in intercultural communication and international exchanges has become an important issue.

3. The Chinese Dragon

The “dragon” holds an important position and influence in Chinese culture. As a cultural phenomenon, it has permeated all aspects of Chinese social life, becoming both an information carrier of Chinese history and culture and a spiritual symbol for the Chinese nation. As a unique spiritual and cultural creation of the Chinese people, the spiritual connotation of the “dragon” has gradually evolved and changed along with the development of social economy, politics, religion, and values.

3.1 It Is a Symbol of Power

The dragon is closely related to imperial power in Chinese culture and is a symbol of the emperor. The emperor is referred to as the “incarnation of the dragon” and possesses the “majesty of the dragon”. The emperor’s appearance, behaviour, and everyday items were all associated with the “dragon”, using terms such as dragon robe, dragon carriage, dragon face, dragon body, dragon heart, dragon seat, dragon bed, dragon court, and dragon authority, which all symbolize the emperor’s power and

sacred status. In ancient palaces, dragon patterns and images were widely used to display the supreme authority of the emperor. In feudal society, the dragon gradually became a symbol of authority, representing nobility, dignity, power, and intimidating dominance. The common people were not allowed to offend the “dragon” as doing so could result in severe punishment or even death.

3.2 It Is a Symbol of Good Fortune

In Chinese culture, the dragon is often associated with auspiciousness, prosperity, and good fortune. It is regarded as a sacred creature capable of bringing good luck, as seen in the phrase “LONG FENG CHENG XIANG”, which expresses wishes for harmony and good fortune. As a symbol of good luck, the dragon is also prominently featured during festive occasions such as the Lantern Festival and the Spring Festival, when people commonly perform dragon dances and lion dances. This is related to the belief that the dragon has the power to ward off harm and evil. People believe that with the dragon’s protection, they can avoid all disasters and misfortune, ensuring peace and safety.

3.3 It Is a Symbol of Nature and the Universe

In Chinese culture, the dragon is closely linked to the forces of nature and the universe. In the era of an agrarian economy, people, constantly suffering from natural disasters, fantasized about transcending their limitations to control and dominate nature, achieving favorable weather and abundant harvests. In their eyes, the dragon was a deity capable of summoning clouds and rain, becoming the embodiment of natural forces like clouds and rain. It is believed to have the power to control water sources and regulate wind and rain, symbolizing the power of nature. Ancient Chinese people believed that the dragon could bring beneficial rain for harvests, promoting agricultural development. Therefore, the dragon was seen as a symbol of heavenly mandate, representing the harmony between the universe and nature.

3.4 It Is a Symbol of Wisdom

The dragon represents wisdom, strength, and courage. In traditional culture, the dragon is not only the most powerful creature in nature but also a symbol of extraordinary wisdom. For example, dragons often serve as guardians or helpers of wisdom in Chinese mythology, such as the LONG WANG in *Journey to the West*. Dragons also frequently appear in ancient hero legends, symbolizing immense power and an invincible spirit. There are also some legends, such as the story of the “LI YU TIAO LONG MEN”, which is a metaphor for someone who has

achieved success and fame; “WANG ZI CHENG LONG” (hoping one’s child will become a dragon) is a metaphor for parents wishing for their children to be successful and excellent.

4. The Western Dragon

Compared to the Chinese dragon, the Western dragon is often depicted as a negative and threatening creature, typically carrying a sense of menace and negativity.

4.1 It Represents Evil and Destruction

In Western culture, dragons are typically viewed as symbols of evil, destruction, and greed. They often represent disaster, terror, and misfortune. In many Western myths, religious stories, and legends, dragons are enemies that heroes must defeat. For example, in the story of *Saint George and the Dragon*, the dragon is seen as the embodiment of evil. Saint George kills the venomous dragon with a spear and saves the young woman who was to be sacrificed.

These depictions of the dragon make it an embodiment of evil and sin, not only in mythology but also in Western literature and culture. It is often portrayed as a fierce and monstrous creature, an enemy of mankind. The battle between the hero and the dragon represents the struggle between good and evil, and taming or slaying the dragon is something heroes do, symbolizing humanity’s conquest of dark forces.

4.2 It Represents Greed and Wealth

Western dragons are often depicted as creatures that guard treasures and wealth, reflecting their greedy nature. The treasure guarded by dragons in many stories symbolizes excessive material desire. Their possession and protection of wealth often demonstrate endless greed, and this behavior serves as a warning. The dragons typically inhabit caves or underground lairs, guarding vast amounts of gold and jewels, symbolizing the temptation of desire and material wealth. In many stories, the dragon’s treasure becomes the goal of the hero’s quest, by defeating the dragon or reclaiming the treasure, the hero not only acquires wealth but also symbolizes the triumph over the negative influence of greed. In these stories, the dragon’s greed stands in stark contrast to the selfless spirit of the human hero. The hero typically fights the dragon for a higher moral purpose or to save others, while the dragon hoards wealth for personal gain and selfish desire.

4.3 It Represents a Test and Challenge for a Hero

In Western mythology, dragons are often one of the

tests or challenges faced by heroes. Defeating a dragon is typically seen as a symbol of the hero's courage and wisdom. For example, in *Beowulf*, the protagonist Beowulf engages in a battle with a dragon, symbolizing the heroic struggle against evil forces. The cultural significance of dragons in the West is frequently associated with themes of courage, sacrifice, and the battle between humanity and the harsh forces of nature.

Thus, it is evident that in Western culture, dragons are often viewed as violent, malicious monsters that pose a threat to humanity, making them an enemy force that heroes must overcome. As a result, heroes who conquer dragons are revered by common people. Although dragons symbolize powerful evil forces, they ultimately meet their demise, which serves to highlight the hero's brilliance and valor. In this way, the metaphor of the dragon gains an ironic sense of failure—its brutality only serves to accentuate the hero's greatness. The dragon, once a formidable foe, becomes a pitiful creature under the hero's feet, contributing to the warrior's legendary status.

4.4 It Represents Wisdom and Strength

Although dragons in Western culture are often negative figures, there are some Western literary works where dragons are endowed with intelligence and immense power. In some Western myths and stories, dragons are seen as guardians of ancient knowledge or powerful artifacts. For example, in *The Hobbit*, Smaug the dragon guards the treasure of Erebor, which includes not just material wealth but also the historical and cultural significance of the kingdom. The dragon, in this sense, is a keeper of the past and an embodiment of immense power tied to the wisdom of those who created and accumulated wealth. Beyond intelligence, dragons in Western culture also symbolize immense power. Their ability to wield magic, control vast territories, and even manipulate the elements (such as fire or storms) makes them symbols of dominion and influence. In some cultures, the dragon's power is seen as both a blessing and a curse, embodying the duality of wisdom and danger. They represent a force that can be used for good or evil, depending on how it is wielded. In such stories, dragons represent boundless wisdom and power, but they also serve as a warning about the dangers of excessive desire.

5. Challenges and Strategies in Translation

5.1 Misunderstandings and Challenges in Translation

In today's world, with countries increasingly engaging in close communication, cross-cultural communication ac-

tivities are becoming more frequent. However, the barriers and conflicts in cross-cultural communication are also becoming more prominent, and one significant factor is language misunderstanding. As Zhang Meifang (2001) stated, "Translation is not merely the conversion of linguistic symbols, but a form of communication of ideas and culture". Currently, in cross-cultural exchanges between China and the West, the West remains the dominant side, holding a greater advantage in terms of discourse power, strongly spreading its culture through various means. As China's economy grows and its international status rises, it has gradually realized the need to enhance the influence of Chinese culture in the world.

Due to the different cultural connotations of the dragon in Chinese and Western cultures, there are many misunderstandings and challenges during the translation process. The following will explain the difficulties encountered in the translation process by examining the differences between the two cultures. First one is the cultural differences. In Western culture, dragons are typically portrayed as evil creatures, representing destruction and threat. In Chinese culture, however, dragons symbolize good fortune, power, and auspiciousness. Therefore, when translating, it is important to note that the simple term "dragon" cannot fully convey the symbolic meaning of the Chinese dragon, which could lead to misunderstandings by Western readers. Second one is the linguistic differences. The Chinese word "LONG" is not limited to referring to a creature but is more often a cultural symbol, representing the spirit, symbolism, and abstract concepts associated with dragons. On the other hand, the English word "dragon" usually refers to a specific mythical creature. In translation, additional explanations may be needed to help the target readers understand the multi-layered cultural significance. Third one is the differences in myths and legends. There are also differences in the myths and legends surrounding dragons in both cultures. Western dragons are often associated with battles against heroes or the destruction of villages, while Chinese dragons are typically connected with emperors, divine mandates, and natural forces. Translating these mythological contexts accurately, without misleading readers, is a major challenge. The next one is the symbolic translation. In some contexts, the Chinese "LONG" does not merely refer to a mythical creature; it can also represent spiritual qualities or authority. For example, "LONG DE CHUAN REN" (the descendants of the dragon) is a cultural symbol in China. When translating this phrase into English, additional explanation may be required to convey its deeper meaning. The last one is the challenges in intercultural communication. When the "dragon" appears in specific cultural works or religious

contexts in translation, the challenge becomes how to respect the original text while helping readers from another culture understand the underlying cultural and symbolic meanings. This is a common difficulty in translation.

In conclusion, when translating “dragon,” it is essential not only to focus on the literal meaning but also to have a deep understanding of the cultural context, mythology, and symbolic significance.

5.2 The Response Strategies

5.2.1 Domestication and Foreignization Combined

Domestication refers to the target language culture-oriented strategy. The translator will adapt and rewrite the original text to a certain extent in order to bring it closer to the linguistic style of the target culture. However, foreignization refers to the source language culture-oriented strategy. It should preserve the features of the source language. If the translation is aimed at Western readers, a balanced approach of domestication and foreignization can be applied. This ensures that the cultural essence is preserved while making it more accessible to Western readers. For example, “Chinese dragon” or “Loong” conveys cultural differences while also sparking interest in the target culture. At the same time, key cultural elements can be kept through foreignization, allowing readers to experience the original cultural flavor.

5.2.2 Free Translation and Culture Adaptation

Considering cultural differences, the strategy of free translation is adopted, which focuses on conveying the meaning of the original text rather than a literal translation. For example, the word “dragon” is easily understood in Western culture, but to highlight its symbolic meaning in Chinese culture, additional explanations can be added or terms like “Chinese dragon” or “Loong” can be used to emphasize its cultural connotations.

5.2.3 Addition (Explanation)

Addition is a translation strategy that involves adding explanations or annotations to help the target language readers better understand words or concepts in the source language that are difficult to translate directly or carry cultural background. When dealing with specific terms or idioms, the strategy of addition is employed. For example, when translating “LONG DE CHUAN REN” (descendants of the dragon), an annotation or explanation can be added to inform the readers that this expression refers to the Chinese people who consider themselves descendants of the

dragon, carrying a symbolic meaning. Another example is “HONG BAO”, when translating it, an annotation should be added to inform the reader that the red envelopes, or “Hongbao,” are traditional gifts of money given during Chinese New Year and other celebrations, symbolizing good luck and the wish for prosperity in the coming year.

5.2.4 Functional Equivalence

“Functional Equivalence Theory” is a translation strategy proposed by Eugene Nida. This theory emphasizes that translation should not only stay faithful to the vocabulary and syntactic structures of the source language, but also focus on conveying the functional impact of the original text within the target culture, ensuring that the target language readers have the same understanding and reaction as the source language readers. For instance, in Western culture, there might not be an exact equivalent for the concept of “dragon,” so alternative symbols or images like “serpent” or “mystical creature” can be used, focusing on conveying the cultural intent.

6. Conclusion

Through a comprehensive comparison of Chinese and Western dragon cultures, the following conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, there are fundamental differences in how dragons are perceived in Chinese and Western cultures. In Chinese culture, the dragon is a symbol of auspiciousness, wisdom and power, representing natural forces and imperial authority. In contrast, in Western culture, dragons are often associated with evil, destruction, and threat. Secondly, in cross-cultural communication, accurately translating and conveying the cultural meaning of the “dragon” symbol, especially in the context of Chinese and Western cultural exchanges, is a significant challenge. The dragon, depending on cultural background, may lead to misunderstandings. Therefore, in literary works, films, or commercial communication, translators need to employ appropriate strategies. They should not only convey the literal meaning but also think about cultural context, to ensure that readers from the target culture can fully understand and appreciate the symbolic meaning of the dragon. Thirdly, this study demonstrates that understanding and respecting cultural differences is key to promoting cultural exchange. A deeper understanding of the differences in the symbol of the dragon, as well as the use of effective translation strategies, can provide valuable insights and references for fostering mutual understanding between Chinese and Western cultures, thereby promoting global cultural communication and cooperation.

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