

On the translator's habitus of Ken Liu based on sociological perspective: with a case study on *The Three-body Problem*

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Abstract. The success of Ken Liu's translation of Liu Cixin's science fiction *The Three-Body Problem* helped Chinese science fiction known to global readers. The translator, Ken Liu, made a significant contribution in the process. This paper adopts the concept of Translator's Habitus to closely examine the life trajectory of Ken Liu, hence analyzes his selection of the original texts for translation, his views on translation, and translation strategies in the translation of *The Three-Body Problem*. This paper finds that in selecting Chinese science fiction, Ken Liu tends to seek out those that contain the diversity and richness of Chinese speculative fiction while offering compelling narratives that captivate readers worldwide. As to his views on translation, Ken Liu respects the originality of source text as well as emphasizes the reading preferences and habits of target readers. Regarding translation strategies, Liu does not stick to any particular method but flexibly applies strategies based on different situations.

Keywords: translator's habitus, translation of *The Three-Body Problem*, sociological perspective

1. Introduction

Ken Liu, a Chinese American author, translator, and lawyer, has gained significant recognition for his contributions to science fiction and fantasy. Aside from his notable novels, Liu is particularly esteemed for his prowess in translation. He has brought numerous works of Chinese science fiction and fantasy to English-speaking audiences, introducing them to the creations of acclaimed Chinese authors such as Liu Cixin, Chen Qiufan, and Hao Jingfang. Liu's translation of Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* not only elevated Chinese science fiction to international prominence but also earned him the prestigious Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2015. His dual expertise in writing and translation has propelled him to fame within the field of science fiction, making him a notable figure whose influence reaches both literary and academic spheres.

Liu's impact extends beyond his creative works to his role in introducing Chinese science fiction to a global audience, drawing attention from scholars, particularly those in literature and translation studies. In the realm of translation studies, current research often delves into Liu's distinct translation strategies across various works. Ren and Guo [1] delved into the translation of figurative rhetoric in *Folding Beijing*, as translated by Ken Liu. Through the lens of Skopos theory, they scrutinized Liu's adept use of flexible strategies and methods, presenting a model that could shape the future translation of Chinese science fiction. Ren and Wang expanded the discourse to encompass the translation mode of Chinese literature. Their analysis, grounded in considerations of work selection, translator proficiency, and the adoption of translation strategies, proposed that the primary influencers in these decisions are the target markets and readers. Huang [2] conducted an exploration of Ken Liu's translation strategies concerning culture-loaded words in *The Three-Body Problem*. Employing manipulation theory in text analysis, Huang contended that the translator employed amplification, transliteration, domestication, and idiomatic translation strategies due to the manipulation of ideology, poetics, and patronage. These studies collectively contribute to our understanding of Ken Liu's translation strategies, shedding light on how his translations facilitated acceptance among global readers. However, despite the valuable insights offered by these studies at the textual level, a comprehensive understanding of the reasons behind Liu's success in translating Chinese science fiction remains elusive. Further exploration into the broader context and factors contributing to his achievements in translation is warranted.

This paper adopts the concept of translator's habitus to explore Ken Liu's selection of the original texts for translation, his views on translation, and translation strategies. His life trajectory is scrutinized to explain the reasons behind his translator's habitus. Further, in the hope of borrowing experience to improve acceptance of Chinese literature among global readers, this paper analyzes the success of Ken Liu's translation of Chinese science fiction and offers suggestions on making national literature "going global".

2. Translator's habitus

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus has served as a foundational framework for understanding the ways in which individuals' social backgrounds and experiences shape their dispositions, behaviors, and interpretations of the world. Within the field of translation studies, scholars have adapted Bourdieu's concept to explore the notion of "translator's habitus" or "translatorial habitus".

As the product of history, habitus "produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, per the schemes generated by history" [3]. That is to say, "habitus" is a system of durable, transposable dispositions that individuals acquire through their socialization within specific social contexts. These dispositions include embodied habits, preferences, and practices that guide individuals' behaviors and interpretations. Moreover, individuals' habitus is "internalized that they seem second nature, so forgotten that they seem entirely natural". Habitus operates at a sub-conscious level, shaping individuals' choices and actions in alignment with the norms and values of their social milieu.

In translation studies, scholars have applied Bourdieu's concept of habitus to investigate the cognitive, linguistic, and socio-cultural factors influencing translators' practices and decisions. Daniel Simeoni [4] introduced the concept of "translator's habitus", emphasizing the role of translators' background, training, and experiences in shaping their approaches to translation. Simeoni argues that translators develop a set of dispositions and strategies, informed by their linguistic competencies, cultural awareness, and professional norms, which guide their translation practices.

Michaela Wolf [5] offers insights into the socio-cognitive aspects of the translator's habitus. Wolf posits that translators develop a cognitive framework, shaped by their cultural background and linguistic training, which informs their understanding and interpretation of texts. She suggests that a translator's habitus encompasses not only linguistic skills but also socio-cultural competencies, enabling translators to negotiate meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Anthony Pym [6] further explores the notion of a translator's habitus, focusing on its ethical dimensions. Pym contends that translators' habitus influences their ethical decision-making processes during translation, as they navigate complex linguistic and cultural landscapes. He emphasizes the importance of reflexivity and self-awareness in translators' engagement with their habitus, urging them to critically examine their biases and assumptions.

As an instrument to probe into the motivations of one's behavior, habitus is widely adopted in the humanities. Translator's habitus has become a pivotal dimension in analyzing translators' behavior often including their selection of original texts for translation, their views on translation, and translation strategies they adopt in translating [7].

3. Translator's habitus of Ken Liu

3.1. Ken Liu's life trajectory

Ken Liu is a prominent figure in contemporary literature, especially in science fiction, celebrated for his contributions as both a Chinese American writer and translator. To explore Ken Liu's translator's habitus, it is essential to investigate his life trajectory to figure out what influenced his habitus.

Ken Liu was influenced by both Chinese and American culture in his growing up. Born on March 26, 1976, in Lanzhou, China, Liu spent the first 11 years in China where he was raised by Chinese culture and education. At the age of 11, he immigrated to the California, United States. This dual cultural background profoundly influences his work, infusing it with a rich tapestry of Eastern and Western influences. It endows him with a grand perspective to observe and reflect the humanity and the world.

Being born and raised in a family of scientists offered him the chance to close contact with science which might lead him into the field of science. When he was 4 years old, his parents moved abroad as his father went to study statistics in East Germany, while his mother pursued her graduate degree in chemistry in the United States. Liu was left with his paternal grandparents who were both science professors and "book hoarders" in Liu's words [8]. Later when he moved to the United States, his mother was working as a pharmaceutical chemist and his father as a statistical analyst. Through them, Ken Liu saw and heard a lot about science which influenced his future career path.

Liu's academic background is as diverse as his cultural heritage. He pursued his undergraduate studies at Harvard University, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Computer Science. His interest in literature and technology is evident in his writing, where he often explores the intersection of science fiction, fantasy, and cutting-edge technology. In addition to his undergraduate studies, Liu also holds a Juris Doctor degree from Harvard Law School, adding another dimension to his multifaceted career. His background in law provides him with a unique perspective on societal issues, which he often incorporates into his writing, adding depth and complexity to his narratives.

Liu's interest in reading books prompted him eventually to write his novels and translate literature. As a young boy, he was a promiscuous reader. He read romance novels from his aunt's collection of books, detective novels and historical fiction from his

grandmother, and even mathematics and chemistry manuals from his grandfather. His education and interests laid the solid foundation for his future work as a science fiction writer and translator.

As a writer, Liu is best known for his thought-provoking science fiction and fantasy works. His debut novel, *The Grace of Kings* (2015), the first installment in “The Dandelion Dynasty” series, garnered widespread acclaim for its inventive world-building and intricate storytelling. Liu’s writing often explores themes of power, identity, and the human condition, drawing inspiration from both Eastern and Western literary traditions.

As a translator, Liu has made significant contributions as well. He has kept introducing English-speaking audiences to the works of acclaimed Chinese authors such as Liu Cixin, Chen Qiufan, and Hao Jingfang. His translation of Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem* (2014) propelled Chinese science fiction to international acclaim, winning the prestigious Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2015.

Liu’s diverse professional background and cultural heritage have shaped his unique perspective as a writer and translator. His works (both writing and translating) transcend geographical and cultural boundaries, offering readers a glimpse into the complexities of the human experience in a rapidly changing world. Through his storytelling and translation endeavors, Ken Liu continues to bridge gaps between cultures, fostering understanding and appreciation across diverse literary landscapes.

3.2. Ken Liu’s selection of the original texts for translation

Ken Liu chose to translate Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem* firstly due to an invitation from a Chinese company in 2012: China Educational Publications Import and Export Corporation, Ltd. It was seeking an English-language translator for a trippy science-fiction novel titled *The Three-Body Problem*. Ken Liu, as a then-rising star in science-fiction writing, was an appropriate choice: fluent in Mandarin, familiar with Chinese sci-fi tropes and culture. However, Liu had translated only short fiction at the time, though, and capturing the novel in all its complexity seemed daunting.

When Liu read over the book, he found it was unlike anything he had ever read. It is a book full of heady technical passages about quantum theory, nanotechnology, orbital mechanics, and astrophysics, intertwined with profound moral questions about the nature of good and evil and humanity’s place in the universe. In this regard, he accepted to translate this thrilling Chinese sci-fi novel into English. In an interview, Liu said that there are two reasons why he accepted the offer: firstly, he has not translated a full-length novel before, and *The Three-Body Problem* is undoubtedly the best starting point; secondly, he was fascinated by this novel so much that he wanted to bring its brilliance to global readers [9].

In addition, years of reading made Liu sharp in recognizing excellent books. *The Three-Body Problem* is a fascination with its imaginative scope, compelling characters, and thought-provoking exploration of scientific concepts. As his life trajectory equipped him with everything needed in literature translation, Liu decided to take the offer from the Chinese company to help bring this book to the world.

To this day, Ken Liu has translated more than 60 Chinese novels into English. Regarding his selection of other original texts for translation, Ken Liu tends to choose works that resonate with him and possess qualities that he believes will appeal to Western audiences. He has a particular interest in science fiction and fantasy literature that explores universal themes, transcending cultural boundaries. Liu seeks out texts that showcase the diversity and richness of Chinese speculative fiction while offering compelling narratives that captivate readers worldwide.

3.3. Ken Liu’s view on translation

Ken Liu has expressed his view on translation and translator on different occasion. Liu’s approach to translation is unorthodox — perhaps because he came to it somewhat late in his eclectic career. Strict fidelity to the source material is not his chief goal, nor is producing a smooth, Americanized version. He always treats translation as a performance art in that the translator takes the original and performs it in a different medium. He deems that translation is about interpretation and his/her perception of the author’s voice. “I spend a huge amount of energy thinking about how to re-create the voice of the author in a different language and for a different culture” [10].

He believes that people give translators too little credit and too much credit at the same time. “If you’re going to give the translator credit for doing something well, you also need to blame them for everything that’s not good in the book, and that doesn’t seem right in either case. I don’t think the translator should ‘improve’ the work beyond what it is”. That is to say, Liu thinks translators should always seek the delicate balance between fidelity to the original texts and re-creation based on their speculation.

Ken Liu’s views on translation are deeply rooted in his belief in the power of storytelling to bridge cultural divides and foster understanding across linguistic boundaries. He approaches translation as both an art and a craft, aiming to capture the essence of the original text while adapting it to resonate with the target audience. Central to Liu’s philosophy of translation is the concept of fidelity, not only to the literal meaning of the source text but also to its emotional depth, cultural nuances, and stylistic qualities. Liu emphasizes the importance of preserving the voice and intention of the author, stating that “the most important thing for me

is to create a translation that feels as if it were written directly in English by the author". This commitment to authenticity guides Liu's translation principles, which prioritize clarity, coherence, and authenticity. He believes in maintaining a balance between faithfulness to the original text and readability in the target language, ensuring that the translated work remains true to the spirit of the original while also engaging and resonating with the target audience.

Liu's translation process involves meticulous attention to detail, from researching cultural references to carefully crafting sentences to capture the nuances of the source text. He strives to create translations that not only convey the plot and ideas of the original work but also evoke the same emotional impact and resonance for readers in the target language. In his essay "Translating China, Translating Chinese Science Fiction", Liu reflects on the complexities of translating Chinese science fiction for Western audiences, emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity and contextual understanding in the translation process. Overall, Ken Liu's view on translation is characterized by a deep respect for the original text, a commitment to authenticity, and a dedication to creating translations that transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries to resonate with readers around the world.

3.4. Ken Liu's translation strategies

Ken Liu's translation of *The Three-Body Problem* is an overall successful rendition and interpretation of Liu Cixin's original texts. With thick literary color and accurate re-creation in translation, Ken Liu subtly adopted different translation strategies to bring those sci-fi scenarios vivid into readers' imagination while maintaining the author's original underlying implication. The author, Liu Cixin, spoke highly of Liu's translation that he said "...Usually when Chinese literature gets translated to a foreign language, it tends to lose something. But I don't think that happened with *The Three-Body Problem*. I think it gained something" [8].

Several notable translation strategies are listed below with excerpts to analyze their function in constructing the whole rendition.

3.4.1. Creation of words

In science fiction novels, there is often an abundance of neologisms used to construct fantastical settings and narratives. Translating these neologisms not only tests the translator's understanding of the text and grasp of the author's ideas but also requires a great deal of imagination and creativity. In his translation of *The Three-Body Problem*, Liu has coined plenty of vocabulary to depict and restore the science fiction essence present in the original text. The following two examples are new words created by the translator.

(1) Trisolaran

It is one of the key characters in the book that refers to a species of extraterrestrial intelligent civilization in the book. In the original, the author called it "三体人", which could be directly translated as "human of the three-body". However, obviously, this species is extraterrestrial and far different from humans. Hence, the direct translation could not convey the author's intention and even lead to misunderstanding by readers. In this regard, the translator created a new word in English translation as "Trisolaran" based on etymology. The word "Trisolaran" is made of three parts: "tri-", "solar", and "-an". "Tri-" refers to "three" in etymology, seen also in triangle, triple, etc.. "Solar" means "of or pertaining to the sun". "-an" means "pertaining to" in etymology, and often indicates "the one belongs to", seen also in librarians, Christians, etc. By using this new word, the translator avoids the risk of misunderstanding for readers, but at the same time shows that Trisolarians is a special living thing.

(2) Sophon

Sophon is a kind of particle created and controlled by Trisolarians. This particle is created through the two-dimensional expansion of the proton and has highly artificial intelligence after transformation by Trisolarians. In the original book, the author called it "智子", which could be directly translated as "intellectual particle" since the first character "智" means "intelligence, wisdom" in Chinese and "子" has multiple meanings that one of which is "small and hard granular object". Meanwhile, the pronunciation of "智子" is "zhi zi", the same as the pronunciation of "质子 (proton)". In this way, the author tactfully linked these two particles together, suggesting Sophon is intellectual as its feature, and in nature, it is a particle derived from the proton. Knowing the connotation of the name given by the author, the translator chose to create the new word "Sophon" which could demonstrate the feature and nature of this particle. "Sophon" is made of two parts: "soph-" and "-on". "Soph-" is a prefix meaning "wise, clever", seen also in philosophy, sophist, etc.. "-on" as a suffix means subatomic particle that is widely used in names of subatomic particles such as neutron, lepton, and photon. Combining those two parts, the translator reproduced the naming process by the author and provided readers with the same perception of the relation between proton and Sophon.

3.4.2. Use of footnotes

The strategy of using footnotes is arguable in literature translation. Some translators who regard fluency of the target language as a top priority will perhaps try to avoid the use of footnotes which could interrupt the continuity of reading and increase the

readers' reading load and processing efforts [11]. However, footnotes could to a certain degree tackle untranslatability and help readers know clearly about the passage. In multiple interviews, Ken Liu expressed that he is inclined to use limited footnotes when he finds unfamiliar terms or episodes from Chinese history and culture that he wants to tell global readers [8-10]. There are 37 footnotes in total in *The Three-Body Problem*, most of which are used to explain Chinese historical events and related phrases [12].

(3) Chinese colleges (and Tsinghua in particular) have a complicated history of shifting between four-year, five-year, and three-year systems up to the time of the Cultural Revolution. I've therefore avoided using American terms such as "freshman," "sophomore," "junior," and "senior" to translate the classes of these students.

The beginning of *The Three-Body Problem* contains an extensive depiction of the Cultural Revolution in China, characterized by plentiful political vocabulary, undoubtedly presenting a reading barrier for Western readers. Excerpt 3 is the footnote that the translator added to introduce China's higher education system during the Cultural Revolution. At the end of this footnote, the translator further explained the reason why he used "fourth-year students" instead of "senior students" in the translation.

3.4.3. Explanation within the text

As footnotes may interrupt the reader's continuity of reading, many translators will turn to add explanations within the text. This often happens when a scientific or cultural term occurs that could hinder readers from understanding the context. With explanations within the text, translators could deliver relative information to readers while keeping their reading process uninterrupted.

(4) struggle session: This was a public rally intended to humiliate and break down the enemies of the revolution through verbal and physical abuse until they confessed to their crimes before the crowd.

"Struggle session" is a type of event during the Cultural Revolution in China. In Chinese, this event is called "da pi dou". Considering it is only familiar to Chinese readers and Western readers hardly know anything about it, the translator explained this term after its first appearance. The translator used impartial and neutral words to describe the event, trying to give readers a glimpse of the political and historical milieu of China at that time.

3.4.4. Foreignization

Foreignization is one of the most recognizable translation strategies to preserve the cultural distinctiveness of the source text and resist the homogenizing tendencies of dominant cultures [13, 14]. Tymoczko [15] argues that foreignization can be a powerful strategy for challenging colonialist assumptions and reasserting the cultural autonomy of marginalized communities. This echoed in Ken Liu's viewpoint on the position of Chinese culture in world culture. When American reporters ask him why Chinese readers are so excited about *The Three-Body Problem* being nominated for the Nebula Award, Liu replied "You're coming from the modern Rome, the core of world culture, whereas China is at the periphery. For Chinese fans, something they love in their language is being recognized by readers in America, who are perceived as prestige readers" [16]. As his life trajectory bestowed him the desire to help advance the status of Chinese literature in world literature, the translator chose foreignization in translating some common words.

(5) The original text: ...铺着厚厚乌拉草的火炕...

Liu's translation: ...the heated kang stove-beds lined with thick layers of ura sedge...

"Kang" occurs three times in the book. At its first appearance, the translator added "stove-beds" to introduce the key feature of the "kang", facilitating the construction of a conceptual understanding of the "kang" within the readers' minds. This, in turn, enriches the readers' reading experience and ignites their interest in Chinese culture.

3.4.5. Rearrangement of the structure of texts

Though it is not a common translation strategy focusing on lexical and syntax levels, but a rearrangement of the structure of texts could help optimize the flow of the narrative and make it easier to comprehend for readers. In other cases, rearrangement could help the book pass certain scrutiny.

Compared with Liu's translation, the original Chinese edition features a different sequence of chapters, commencing with the summoning of Professor Wang by police and army officers to the Battle Command Center, while the Cultural Revolution episodes are presented as flashbacks. This arrangement imparted a distinctively Japanese thriller or detective story atmosphere to the original *The Three-Body Problem*. However, the author's original intention was for the narrative to commence with the Cultural Revolution chapters, with the change in sequence being motivated by concerns regarding potential sensitivities surrounding this content. The decision was made to revert to the original chapter order, resulting in a revised structure that the translator found to be more appealing. With this adjustment, the Cultural Revolution segments cease to be merely incidental flashbacks but instead serve as integral foundations of the narrative. Although the rearrangement of chapters is unusually invasive for translators, but in this case the move makes the story flows more smoothly.

4. Conclusion

With a dual cultural background encompassing both Chinese and American influences and a profound love for literature, Ken Liu has possessed the perception of Chinese and Western cultures and has established a solid literary foundation prior to engaging in writing and translation work. His life trajectory has endowed him with the potential to become both a writer and a translator. Driven by his passion for science fiction and Chinese literature, Liu predominantly selects Chinese contemporary science fiction works for translation, having translated more than 60 pieces ranging from short stories to full-length novels. Proficient in Western literature, Liu adeptly utilizes his language to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, striving to authentically convey Chinese culture to global readers. Regarding translation strategies, Liu does not adhere rigidly to any particular method but instead flexibly applies strategies.

The success of Liu's translation of *The Three-Body Problem* offers valuable insights and experiences for how national literature can be transferred into world literature. Regarding the selection of the original texts for translation, it is of great importance to balance cultural universality and national specificity. In terms of views on translation, translators should hold an open and inclusive view that avoids rigid adherence to the source text while also refraining from excessive liberty in interpretation. As to translation strategies, translators should always be flexible and adaptive according to different contexts, necessitating the judicious adoption of various approaches to optimize communication with readers.

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