

## Case Study

# A Study on the Readability of Liu Cixin's Science Fiction Novels in English Translation

## -- A Case Study of "Taking Care of God"

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### **Abstract**

*Chinese science fiction works have been consistently winning international awards, which is closely related to the excellent writing of the authors and the invaluable contribution of the translators. There is a growing demand for the translation of Chinese science fiction novels, making it necessary to study the translation process. The translations by American science fiction writer and translator Liu Yukun have been well received by foreign readers. The key to their success lies in the fact that the translated texts capture the underlying ideas of the original works and are highly readable. By analyzing the translation artistry of "Taking Care of God", it is evident that the attention to detail in the translation makes the Eastern story become real and believable in the minds of Western readers. The adaptation and translation of the original work ensures that the story is easy to understand, vivid, and interesting, while also preserving the elegant and captivating writing style of the original text, thus guaranteeing the readability of the English translation.*

### **Keywords**

*Translation Methods, science fiction, translation, readability, Taking Care of God, Liu Yukun*

### **1. Introduction**

Since 2015, Chinese science fiction creators have been making rapid strides towards the international stage. With a multitude of science fiction literary achievements that have gained international acclaim, Liu Cixin's "The Three Body Problem" stands out as a shining example. It was selected as the Best Novel at the 2015 Hugo Awards, earning China's science fiction industry global recognition and admiration. The following year, emerging talent Hao Jingfang won the Best Novella category at the Hugo Awards with her work "Folding Beijing". Thanks to their efforts, Chinese authors have attracted

the interest of their overseas peers and readers. However, due to factors such as a lack of foreign translators, the translation of Chinese science fiction novels is relatively lagging behind. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility and obligation of Chinese translators to translate excellent works of Chinese science fiction literature into other languages, allowing foreign readers to access the essence of Chinese science fiction and helping Chinese science fiction authors succeed abroad. Based on this background, this paper intends to analyze the characteristics of the English translation of *Taking Care of God* and explore and summarize Liu Yukun's methods of achieving readability in the English translation of science fiction novels, in order to provide reference for the translation of other science fiction works.

## **2. Translator Liu Yukun and Taking Care of God**

### *2.1 Translator Liu Yukun*

Liu Yukun is a Chinese-American science fiction writer and futurist. He was born in Lanzhou, China, and immigrated to the United States with his parents at the age of eleven. He received his B.A. in English and his J.D. from Harvard University. His "Chinese" attitude of self-identification and English-language living environment make his works not only have the norms of pure English and American novels, but also reveal the flavor of Chinese culture, and he is outstanding in the fusion of sci-fi elements and Chinese culture. Liu Yukun's advantages are also fully reflected in his translation of Chinese science fiction literature, which not only accurately conveys the original message and author's viewpoints, but also fully takes into account the reading experience and comprehension of the readers of the translated language.

### *2.2 Characteristics of the Taking Care of God*

*Taking Care of God* tells the story of the "God" civilization, which is in its twilight years due to its over-reliance on science and technology, comes to Earth in the hope of being supported by human beings. Human beings agree to alimony of God in order to obtain the advanced science and technology of God's civilization, but due to the over-advanced science and technology of the civilization, which is beyond the grasp of human beings, their attitude towards God gradually shifts from one of respect to one of disdain. God's civilization senses the change in human attitudes and decides to leave Earth to continue wandering. The plot of this work is relatively everyday, even a little cozy, and many science fiction novels that kind of tension, dark atmosphere is very different, but there is no lack of Liu Cixin's unique rich imagination and deep philosophical thinking. Liu Cixin's portrayal of God's civilization is a bold scientific fantasy, but also seems to contain insinuations about today's aging society; while portraying ordinary people's simple and primitive feelings towards science and technology, it is also filled with a sense of pragmatism and irony, and it also gives some warnings about the predicaments of "the cradle of science and technology" under the cell phones and the Internet in our society today. It is also a warning to the plight of the "cradle of science and technology" in our society today under cell phones and the Internet. The novel is a contrasting collision between the rural culture of northern China and the elements of science fiction, with the use of many slang expressions such as "倒了八辈子霉",

“吃不了兜着走”，“听听是人话吗”，etc. The novel is also a reflection of the “cradle of technology” under the mobile phone and the Internet. The use of slang phrases with great emotional color vividly reflects the color of Chinese vernacular culture and the emotions of the characters. Obviously, for the translator of *Alimony to God*, in order for readers to have a deeper understanding and resonance of the unique charm and inner spirit of Chinese science fiction conveyed in it, it is very important for him to faithfully preserve the cultural patterns and emotional colors of the original text in his translation, which requires the translator to be familiar with the cultural backgrounds of the relevant countries as well as have a considerable understanding of the language and the ability to use it.

### 3. How to Ensure Readability

Readability refers to the degree to which the content of a book, newspaper, magazine or article is appealing and the value that the reading material has for reading and enjoyment” (Jiang, 2014, p. 31).

According to Ran Bin (2006), readability is, on the one hand, the nature of the text itself that makes people able to read, willing to read, and like to read, and, on the other hand, the reader’s value judgment of the text itself. Readability is both the requirement of the anthropological nature of literature and the primary factor of literary communication.

Readability is one of the necessary attributes of literary works, which emphasizes the reading experience of readers, and the attraction of literary works to readers as well as the infectious force of the works is its proper meaning.

The readability of science fiction translation not only requires the translator to have a comprehensive and deep understanding of the original content and cultural background knowledge, but also requires him/her to have strong translation literacy and expression ability. In this way, the translator can realize a precise grasp of the original author’s spirit, fully retain some of the core cultural elements, and have the ability to make the necessary deletions and adaptations, so as to avoid causing the readers of the translated language to misunderstand the culture and the content of the article.

#### 3.1 Translate Details to Increase Realism

Adding detailed descriptions can make the story more realistic, enhance its believability, and make science fiction more authentic, thus creating a lasting appeal to readers.

例 1：这时他往往开始发呆，忘记了手中的活儿，直到村头传来从田间归来的人声才使他猛醒过来，加紧干着手中的活儿，同时总是长叹一声。

God often forgot his work and stood quietly, lost in thought. Only when the noise of the villagers returning from the fields filled the air would he be startled awake and hurry to finish his washing. He sighed.

“stood quietly” adopts amplification, if only stood quietly, the readers may not be able to understand God’s state of mind at this moment, so Liu Yukun increased the action detail description, “an old man, stood quietly stood quietly”. -God’s deep memory and tens of thousands of years of rich past experience, and the moment of the wretchedness, sadness of the mood of the most vivid portrayal, the

following “He sighed.” is even more echoed God’s psychological state of sadness and wretchedness of the situation.

例 2: 所有的飞船同时停泊到位, 这样可以避免飞船质量引力在地球海洋上产生致命的潮汐。

In this manner, the alien ships avoided causing life-threatening tides in the oceans due to their imbalanced mass.

The work is hard science fiction and therefore involves some scientific knowledge. Combined with the context, we can understand that the maneuvering of the ship’s mooring was accomplished simultaneously in an extremely complex formation and orbit. The purpose is to prevent large mass objects from approaching the Earth to disrupt the Earth’s gravitational balance and cause tidal phenomena. However, it is not directly stated in the original text that the cause of tides is gravitational imbalance. The addition and deletion of details to ensure accurate understanding by readers of the translated language is skillful behavior. In order to increase the readability of the translation and reduce the difficulty of readers’ understanding, Liu Yukun makes the word imbalanced explicit, so that readers who may not understand physical concepts such as the relationship between gravity and mass can easily understand why the spaceships have to land at the same time in a complex formation, which makes the translation more sci-fi and more readable.

例 3: 秋生爹很快让老花雕灌得有三分迷糊了, 他冲上帝竖起了大拇指。

Qiu sheng’s father quickly became a little drunk with cups of vintage huangjiu.

Regarding the term “老花雕”, Liu Yukun did not directly adopt the method of transliteration and annotation as he did with Chinese historical classics and dynasties. Instead, he used a combination of domestication and foreignization, translating it as “vintage huangjiu.” “Hua Diao Jiu” is a type of yellow wine in the category of fermented wines, and it is synonymous with Shaoxing wine, a traditional famous wine admired by literati throughout the ages. It is named after the carved flowers on the wine barrel, which symbolize the parents’ blessings for their daughters. The translator did not choose to use foreignization in translating “花雕”. Instead, they considered the complex cultural connotations of “花雕” and the emphasis on its function in drinking and entertaining in the original context. There was no need to force foreignization and burden readers with additional reading. On the other hand, the term “黄酒” was translated using transliteration, with domestication as the main approach and foreignization as a secondary approach. This to some extent can spread Chinese traditional culture to overseas readers and increase the readability of the translation. It avoids the shortcomings of a translation that appears stiff and obscure in introducing Chinese traditional culture.

### 3.2 Imagination and English Idioms

例 4: ”首先, 一定要飞出去!”上帝对着长空伸开双臂, 他身上宽大的白袍随着秋风飘舞, 像一面风帆。

“First, you must get off this rock!” God spread out his arms towards space. His white robe danced in the fall wind like a sail.

The translator's use of "get off this rock" to translate "一定要飞出去" is quite clever. Microsoft has previously released a strategy game called "Before We Leave". The game is set before the destruction of Earth's civilization, where humans make various efforts to leave Earth and establish a new civilization in space. If players are able to repair the spaceship within 90 minutes, they achieve the achievement "Get off This Rock". This resonates with the storyline in the article where God cannot repair his own spaceship and instructs humanity that Earth's civilization will eventually be destroyed, emphasizing the need to prepare and leave Earth. In recent years, science fiction-themed video games have become a new form of cultural entertainment that is being embraced by more and more young people. Therefore, there is often a significant overlap in the audience for science fiction novels and science fiction games, and the content of both complements each other. This requires translators to have a broad knowledge base and imagination. Using game terminology, which is already familiar and easy to understand, can enhance the interest of the translated science fiction novels and achieve a synergistic effect.

例 5: "这里的什么东西都是傻的, 我们不像你们什么都有机器伺候着!"

We aren't like you, being waited on hand and foot by smart machines.

In the given example, if the speaker is an irritable farmer, translating "伺候" as "serve" would not be appropriate for the speaker's identity and emotions. Instead, using the English idiom "waited on hand and foot" would convey the meaning of "饭来张口" naturally and effectively. This idiom itself contains various rhetorical devices and creates a vivid imagery. Moreover, it is usually concise yet conveys a clear message, which can stimulate rich imagination and further deepen the characterization.

### 3.3 Abstract to Concrete to Enhance Readability

When the original text is semantically vague or the vocabulary is too abstract, it is helpful to use specific references to replace the simple abstract expressions in the original text. This will make the expression more concrete and enhance the effectiveness of the translation.

例 6: 上帝抚着胡子平静地说: "飞到哪儿算哪儿吧, 太空无边无际, 哪儿还不埋人呢?"

"Space is limitless. It's the same wherever you die."

"哪的黄土不埋人" is a common expression in Chinese, which means that no matter where you are buried, it's the same. Translating this expression into English requires careful consideration of the implied meaning. A literal translation of "埋人" (bury people) would be accurate but fail to convey the actual meaning and result in a nonsensical translation. By translating "哪儿还不埋人呢?" as "It's the same wherever you die," Liu Yukun has made the intended meaning of the original text more specific and clear, avoiding a hollow translation without any readable details and enhancing the readability of the translation.

例 7: 在这灿烂的星空下, 他愚拙了一辈子的脑袋终于开了一次窍。

Under the brilliant, starry sky, his head, full of a lifetime of foolishness, finally opened up to insight.

The term "开窍" in the original text is quite abstract. After researching, I found that "开窍" comes

from “Dream of the Red Chamber”, where it means having clear thinking and direct control over one’s senses, resulting in quick thinking. Liu Yukun used the phrase “opened up to insight” to show that Autumn’s Father finally had a moment of realization. This rephrasing makes the meaning of the translation clearer and enhances the readability and expressive power of the article.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article, through the above case studies, has provided a preliminary summary of translation strategies that can be applied to improve the readability of translated texts. The readability of a translation not only lies in the translator’s faithfulness to the original work, but also in how they handle the details and bring out the underlying “technological flavor” that may not be explicitly mentioned in the original text. When the original text is concise, emotionally intense, or expresses ideas in a more abstract manner that requires further elaboration, the following two approaches can be used to modify the expression of the translation: first, making good use of associations and idioms to clarify the true meaning; second, translating abstract concepts into concrete terms to enhance understanding.

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