

Original Paper

Applying Descriptivist Norms to Folklore Translation

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Abstract

*This research delves into the analysis of descriptivist norms in the translation of folklore, using the translation of *The Epic of Baeuqloxdoh* as an example. Folklore, representing the collective wisdom of diverse cultures, poses complex challenges in translation where preservation and adaptation intersect. Translation norms, including Gideon Toury's initial, preliminary, and operational norms, play a pivotal role. Through a comparative analysis of two translated versions of the epic, this paper aims to elucidate the norms underpinning the translation process. By scrutinizing the similarities and differences in translation choices, the study reveals norms governing the translation process. Despite the limitations posed by a small sample size, this research contributes to understanding folklore translation and sheds light on its broader implications for intercultural communication and the preservation of literary heritage.*

Keywords

*folklore translation, translation norms, initial norms, operational norms, preliminary norms, *The Epic of Baeuqloxdoh**

1. Introduction

Embedded within the rich tapestry of human heritage, folklore stands as a testament to the collective wisdom, cultural ethos, and linguistic nuances of diverse societies. The act of translating such narratives, while ostensibly a linguistic endeavor, engenders profound questions about the interplay between preservation and adaptation. To answer them, translation norms play an important role. According to Gideon Toury, translation norms refer to the set of rules and conventions that guide the translation process and determine the acceptability of a translation within a particular cultural environment (Toury, 2021). Thus, this paper seeks to unveil the norms governing the Chinese-English translation of folklore by contrasting two translated versions of *The Epic of Baeuqloxdoh* (also known

as the *Buluotuo Epic*, 布洛陀史诗, the scripture of Zhuang people in Guangxi province in China).

This research borrows Gideon Toury's theory on translation norms as a frame. He categorized these norms into two main types: preliminary norms and operational norms. The preliminary norms are subdivided into translation policy and directness in translation, while operational norms are made up of matricial norms and textual-linguistic norms. The methodology involves analyzing identical and divergent elements in two English versions of the epic, as well as recurring patterns in translation choices, to reconstruct the norms governing the translation process.

The texts used in this research include *The Epic of Baeuqloxdoh* translated by Jiaquan Han, and *Hanvueng: The Gosse King and the Ancestral King* translated by David Holm. It is important to note that this research is limited to these texts, without consideration of other folklore literature. Additionally, the narratives in *Hanvueng: The Goose King and the Ancestral King* represent only a chapter of *The Epic of Baeuqloxdoh*, thus the analysis is confined to overlapping content in both works. This paper serves as both an evaluation and introduction to the traditional Chinese ethnic literature of *The Epic of Baeuqloxdoh*. Moreover, it aims to contribute to general translation studies and offer insights for translators working within this genre.

2. Observations on Folklore Literature

Folklore is the traditional knowledge and beliefs of a community, passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. It includes stories, songs, proverbs, riddles, dances, customs, and beliefs. Folklore is often seen as a way of preserving a community's history and culture (Ben-Amos, 1971).

Translating folklore poses distinct challenges due to its unique characteristics. Folklore is often transmitted orally from one generation to another. Although in the case of *The Epic of Baeuqloxdoh*, there do exist some written versions, they are slightly different in contents which are confusing and rely on the translator reorganization. In addition, the original text is in the Zhuang language (a language used by an ethnic minority in China), adding complexity to its translation. Another feature of folklore is that they frequently embody and convey the cultural identity, values, and beliefs of a particular society. They reflect the worldview, historical events, and ideals of the culture from which they originate. What's more, many folklore traditions are associated with rituals, celebrations, and ceremonies. These features underscore the importance of folklore in cultural and historical conservation and pose challenges to its translation.

3. Background Information on *The Epic of Baeuqloxdoh*

Baeuqloxdoh is the creator god in the Zhuang ethnic minority in China. The epic of Baeuqloxdoh is an important part of Zhuang culture, and it embodies the knowledge and thoughts of ancient Zhuang people towards the world, nature, and humanities. It has been orally transmitted across generations, tracing its origins back to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.). It narrates the creation of the earth, sky,

and humanity by Baeuqloxdoh, along with his inventions of language, writing, the calendar, ethics, morality, and religious rituals. Recognized for its profound significance in various domains, including folk history, culture, religion, literature, philosophy, and art, the epic was recorded on the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2006.

The 2012 published translation of *The Epic of Baeuqloxdoh* by Jiaquan Han, Zhongxi Huang, and others marked a significant literary event. David Holm, an American ethnologist specializing in Chinese ethnic languages, collaborated with Yuanyao Meng to translate a section of this epic, titled *Hanvueng: The Goose King and the Ancestral King*, which was published in 2015. Holm's version discussed in this paper is only one chapter in *The Epic of Baeuqloxdoh*. Consequently, this paper's analysis is confined to the overlapping content in these two publications. *Hanvueng: The Goose King and the Ancestral King* narrates the story of two royal stepbrothers embroiled in a profound rivalry and conflict. This narrative has traditionally been recited on various occasions, often in the context of violent deaths or fraternal disputes.

4. Norms in Translation

Norm, as defined in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, is "a principle of right action binding upon the members of a group and serving to guide, control, or regulate proper and acceptable behavior". In translation, norms constrain translators' practices in various ways. This is because translation extends beyond mere linguistic manipulation; it is a cultural act that bears cultural significance. In the former case, translators could play with words as they like with not too many concerns about their impacts on society. In the latter case, translators have to abide by rules so that their translations are acceptable to most of the readers, and the act of communication between two languages and cultures is thus completed. Norms become particularly crucial in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps, as each region has its distinct dialects and language habits. Translators, therefore, must navigate various strategies, select appropriate materials, and consider publication policies within the target culture. These considerations collectively constitute the norms in language translation.

Gideon Toury's (2012, 2021) theory on translation norms offers a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics. This paper adopts his framework to analyze the translation norms applied in *The Epic of Baeuqloxdoh*. His theory on translation norms is briefly introduced as follows.

Initial norms precede other types of norms. Initial norms refer to the fundamental choice that a translator makes at the beginning of the translation process. It's about deciding whether to stick closely to the norms of the original text (adequacy) or to adapt to the norms of the target culture (acceptability). This choice serves as a starting point or a foundational guideline for the translator's decisions throughout the translation process. It helps determine how closely the translation will align with the original text's norms versus how much it will be adjusted to fit the norms of the culture where the translation will be used.

In the process of translation, norms can be divided into two broad categories: preliminary norms and operational norms. Preliminary norms encompass two primary sets of factors that influence the translation process. The first set of considerations is related to the presence of a translation policy. This policy, whether explicitly formulated or implicitly understood, serves as a guiding framework for the translation endeavor. Such policies can originate from various entities such as translation agencies, publishing houses, governmental bodies, and more. The nature of these policies can differ significantly based on the specific objectives of the organization and the nature of the texts being translated. The second set of considerations pertains to the notion of “directness” in translation. Directness in this context refers to the extent to which translation from an intermediary language is permissible. In other words, it involves the decision on whether translations should be carried out directly from the source language to the target language or whether the use of an intermediary language is allowed. If it is allowed, should the mediating language be informed to readers? This aspect of preliminary norms can significantly impact the translation process and its outcomes.

Operational norms, on the other hand, are concerned with the actual translation process and the strategies and techniques used by translators to produce translations. They affect how the text is put together, including the distribution of language within it, how sentences are constructed, and the choice of words. They also influence the way the source and target texts relate to each other, determining what remains consistent in the translation and what changes.

5. Norms Applying to the Translation of *The Epic of Baeuqloxdoh*

5.1 Preliminary Norms

Han’s version of *The Epic of Baeuqloxdoh* was published by Guangxi People’s Publishing House in 2012. As stated above, preliminary norms are affected by translation policies issued by translation agencies and governmental bodies, and more. In this specific case, Han’s translation must first follow the publishing laws of China, and then meet the rules and expectations of the particular publishing house. An overview of these policies is showcased as follows.

According to China’s *Regulations on Publication Administration*, “the publishing endeavor shall hold fast in the direction of serving the people and socialism...disseminate and accumulate all the scientific, and technological and cultural knowledge that is beneficial to the improvement of the national quality, the development of the economy and the all-round progress of the society, carry forward the splendid accomplishments of the national culture, facilitate international cultural exchanges, as well as to enrich and improve the cultural life of the people”. Additionally, Article 26 of this law bans publications that “endanger public ethics or the fine national cultural traditions, incite national hatred or discrimination, undermine the solidarity of the nations, or infringe upon national customs and habits.” These are the laws or norms that all publications in China shall abide by. On the other hand, Guangxi People’s Publishing House has its own rules and expectations. In the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Guangxi

People's Publishing House underwent a transformation from a large comprehensive publishing house into a comprehensive local publishing house primarily focused on publishing political theories, while also featuring a wide range of multidisciplinary and multilevel publications in the field of social sciences. According to *The Publishing Standards for Academic Works of People's Publishing House*, the publication of academic works is required to align with the principles of serving the people and socialism. This involves adhering to the policy of encouraging diverse perspectives and intellectual discourse, while fostering academic innovation, exchange, and accumulation.

Holm's version was published in 2015 by Brill in Leiden, Netherlands. The publication laws of the Netherlands and the rules and expectations of Brill are stated as follows.

The Dutch Constitution guarantees the freedom of expression and the freedom of the press, and this freedom subject to certain limitations such as respect for human dignity, privacy, and public order. In addition, the Dutch Criminal Code contains provisions that prohibit certain forms of publication, such as defamation, incitement to hatred or violence, discrimination, blasphemy, and disclosure of state secrets. On Brill's side, it requires its authors, especially translators, to align with the following rules or norms. Authors are expected to provide clear and accurate translations that maintain the original text's style, tone, and meaning. They should indicate any changes, additions, or omissions made in the translation process, such as annotations, footnotes, glossaries, etc. The author should ensure that the translation is consistent with Brill's content standards, which include ethical principles, academic integrity, quality assurance, and peer review. Authors should obtain the necessary rights for publishing translations and respect the intellectual and moral rights of the original works and their creators.

Another factor to be discussed is "directness". As mentioned above, it concerns the extent to which a translation from a mediate language is permitted. In Han's version, the content is arranged as the original ancient manuscript in the style of five-character regulated verse: original ancient manuscript in Zhuang characters on the first line, pinyin transcription of Zhuang script on the second line, International Phonetic Alphabet representation of Zhuang characters on the third line, modern Chinese translation on the fourth line, English translation on the fifth line. As told in the epilogue, the compilation and phonetic annotation of ancient Zhuang characters, Chinese translation, and English translation were completed by different teams of experts. It is also clear that the mediate language here is modern Chinese. In other words, the work is first translated from ancient Zhuang characters to modern Chinese, and then it is translated from the modern Chinese version to English.

In Holm's version, the translation and editing processes are detailed in the book's preface. The project involved collaborative efforts, starting with Meng Yuanyao transcribing and initially explaining Huang Ziyi's spoken words, including preliminary notes on the text and cultural context in Chinese. These initial notes served as a foundation for further discussions and in-depth research, ultimately resulting in a comprehensive set of English notes. These notes provide information about how words are used, the grammar, and the cultural and historical context. Holm was in charge of the parts of the notes that deal

with grammar and the history of the language, creating three indexes that go along with the text, and putting together the final version of the book. To make it clear, Huang Ziyi was a local scholar who collected and translated the Hanvueng text into Chinese. Meng Yuanyao is the co-author of the volume and a professor in the Department of Minority Languages at Guangxi University for Nationalities in Nanning. He completed his PhD thesis at the University of Melbourne and he also knows a wide range of Zhuang dialects and other linguistic and cultural environments. In short, he knows both Chinese and English. It is clear, in this process, that modern Chinese works as the mediate language.

5.2 Operational Norms

Operational norms refer to the set of guidelines and conventions that influence translators' decisions during the actual process of translating a text. These norms are specific to the translation task at hand and influence the choices translators make as they work on transforming the source text into the target language.

An intriguing example of this is observed in the translation of a title by Han and Holm. Han translated it as *Prince Cojvuengz and Prince Hanquvuengz*, while Holm opted for *Hanvueng: The Goose King and the Ancestral King*. This variation highlights some differences: the use of "king" versus "prince", "Cojvuengz" versus "ancestral", and "Hanquvuengz" versus "goose". Additionally, Holm placed "Hanvueng" at the beginning of the title. These differences indicate the norms guiding the translation and are thus worth analysis. One thing worth mentioning is that Hanquvuengz and Hanvueng are the same words, as Holm explained in the Conventions section, he omitted tone symbols at the end of syllables (-z, -j, -x, -q, and -h). Thus, Hanquvuengz becomes Hanvueng. Holm's version was translated from a manuscript titled 漢皇一科, meaning the entire liturgy of Hanvueng. Holm clearly gave up on the idea of directly translating the title. Instead, he chose naturalization. As described in the introduction section, Holm sees the work as an epic, and thus Entire Liturgy of Hanvueng, which sounds more like a religious work, won't be a good choice. Clearly, in this perspective, *Hanvueng: The Goose King and the Ancestral King* as an epic, is more attractive to its target audiences and readers, and if the other way round, it may only attract scholars or readers interested in religion, which is a far smaller population. On the contrary, Han adopted the same method and the title goes *Prince Cojvuengz and Prince Hanquvuengz*. He also abandoned the religious sense and made the storyline stand out. The difference is that Holm placed Hanvueng at the beginning of the title which indicates that Hanvueng is the main character of this epic, and Han paralleled the two characters. What's more, Han chose the word "prince", which corresponds with the fact. While Holm's choice of the word "king" is not without basis, it's more of a literal translation, as the original Zhuang character is "王" which means "king". Besides, in Holm's version, the relationship between the king and his two sons is clearly stated in the body of the text, so it leaves no confusion here in the title. Regarding the terms "Cojvuengz" and "Hanquvuengz", Han opted for transliteration, introducing readers to the original pronunciation and culture, yet potentially hindering comprehension. In contrast, Holm uses domestication, interpreting

“Cojvueng” as “Ancestral King”, a term indicating the heir to a chieftaincy, and rendering “Hanquvengz” as “goose.” This latter choice is informed by the understanding that the syllable “hanq” in “Hanquvengz” commonly refers to “goose”, a migratory bird. To summarize, instead of keeping the pronunciation, Holm chose to reveal the connotation behind it, which adapts the original culture to the target reader and thus makes it reader friendlier.

The translation of culture-loaded words also deserves some consideration, as these words often mirror the norms guiding the translation process. Here are a few examples for consideration.

(1) SS: 不要推三再拖四

TT: You should not make any sorts of excuses (Han)

TT: Don't say three and then say four (Holm)

(2) SS: 今天吉日是“要安”

TT: Today is right a lucky day, “Yau'an” (Han)

TT: Today is said to be the day of Essencial Peace (Holm)

(3) SS: 八字交到媒婆手，得到八字媒婆回

TT: Having obtained the daughter's Eight Characters, The match-maker makes her way back (Han)

TT: The matchmaker got the Horoscope and came back, The matchmaker got the paper and then returned (Holm)

(4) SS: 恶语说给亲骨肉

TT: And all ill remarks are showering on his own flesh and blood (Han)

TT: The phrases she spoke were destructive of his child by his first wife (Holm)

(5) SS: 罕王旧衣过新年，单薄衣裳过腊月

TT: Prince Hanquvengz can only wear rags in Spring Festival, He has to endure the cold in winter with thin clothes (Han)

TT: Hanvueng wore old clothes even during the First Month, He wore thin garments even through the winter La month (Holm)

(1) In the first example, the original phrase 推三再拖四 literally means “to postpone three and delay four more”, indicating the act of delaying or postponing something multiple times. The whole idiom conveys the idea of repeatedly putting off tasks, actions, or decisions, leading to a cycle of procrastination and avoidance. Han's translation employs domestication strategy, while Holm retains the numbers and explained it later in the textual and ethnographic notes. (2) In the second example, the phrases “the lucky day” and “the day” differ in their focus on luck and significance, respectively. Regarding the translation of 要安, both Han and Holm opted for foreignization but with distinct approaches. Han used transliteration, preserving the original sound, whereas Holm applied a literal translation, converting 要 to “Essential” and 安 to “Peace”, forming the phrase “Essencial Peace”. Holm also included a detailed explanation in his notes the concept of 要安 together with its pronunciation and the inner meanings behind it. (3) In the third example, 八字 represents the year,

month, day, and hour of a person's birth. It is a Chinese astrological system that determines people's destiny and personality traits. Han literally translated 八字 into "Eight Characters" and added an annotation explaining its definition and use in China. Holm, on the other hand, chose the word "Horoscope", the counterpart of 八字 in English, and provided a detailed explanation of the word in notes on its literal translation, pronunciation, definition, and usage. In short, he chose a concept that is familiar to the English readers to substitute the original unfamiliar one to try to reach the same effect.

(4) In the fourth example, "own flesh and blood" is an idiomatic expression in English commonly used to describe relationships between parents and children, siblings, and other close relatives. It is a very close replacement of the Chinese expression 骨肉 which literally means "bone and flesh". In Holm's version, the imagery of "bone and flesh" seems to be omitted at first glance, but it's not without a reason. In fact, this reflects the different translation modes adopted by the two versions. In Han's version, his team first translated the original Zhuang script into modern Chinese and then to English based directly on the modern Chinese edition, which means that the word choice and sentence construction of the English version relied heavily on the Chinese edition. On Holm's side, his co-author Meng Yuanyao transcribed the local people's recitation and provided initial Chinese notes. These evolved into comprehensive English notes through ongoing discussions and research. Holm was responsible for the grammar sections, index creation, and the final product. The expression 骨肉 was chosen in the process of Chinese translation and thus it was retained in the English translation. In fact, no imagery of "bone and blood" was mentioned in the original Zhuang script. Due to this reason, the expression "flesh and blood" occurred in Han's version and was omitted in the other. This also reflects the potential effects of an intermediate language on translation.

(5) In the fifth example, "腊月" is known for being the final month of the lunar year, leading up to the Chinese New Year celebrations. In Han's version, he gave up using literal translation and chose the word "cold" which fit well with the central idea that the sentence wants to convey. In contrast, Holm chose transliteration and added the word "winter", so that the readers know that "La month" is a winter month, which strengthens the main idea of the sentence. In addition, this method made a parallelism which is commonly seen in epics.

From a holistic perspective, domestication and foreignization, literal and free translation are commonly seen in both versions. However, according to the author's observation, literal translation and foreignization occur more frequently in Holm's version, while domestication and free translation are frequently seen in Han's version. Partially, this is determined by the different aims that the authors want to achieve. As stated in *The Epic of Baeuqloxdoh*, Han sees the book as a way to carry forward the rich cultural and ideological content of the epic, enhance its influence, and facilitate cultural exchanges and mutual learning among various world cultures. On the other hand, Holm wants to provide a translated and annotated epic from Guangxi in Southern China, make the document publicly accessible, address points of difficulty, and provide a coherent account of the text, its readings, and its meaning at both the literal and discursive levels. To a greater extent, it is determined by norms. In the two versions,

the chief editors responsible for the two books are from different countries and so are the publishers, that is at least two norm systems governing the process of translation.

5.3 Initial Norms

As previously mentioned, initial norms deal with the matter of acceptability and adequacy of a translation. If the translator sticks more to the original text, he/she leans more to the adequacy side. On the other hand, if the translator adheres more to the target text, acceptability weighs more in decision-making in the translation process. After a close investigation and study, it is revealed that both Han and Holm have made efforts to strike a balance between acceptability and adequacy. However, differences are still evident in the two versions of translation.

Examining the cultural appropriateness of the translation is a good way to study which side the translators take. Thus the translation of culturally loaded words should be closely checked. In Han's version, free translation is predominantly employed, capturing the essence of the source text while often discarding its imagery. On the contrary, Holm frequently opted for literal translation, supplementing it with comprehensive explanations in the latter part of his book to enhance acceptability. Although explanatory notes can also be found in Han's version, they are relatively short and rare. For example, the translation of “孤掌难鸣”. Han abandoned the original images and chose to convey their meaning, and thus the sentence is translated as “It is difficult for him to achieve anything without support”. In Holm's version, the images of hand and sound are reserved, and it is translated as “When one hand claps it does not make a sound”.

Another perspective to be examined is the faithfulness to the source text, that is how well the translation preserves the meaning, tone, and style of the original for adequacy. As commonly acknowledged by translation studies, it is impossible to achieve absolute equivalence due to the differences in languages and cultures. Therefore, things to preserve and abandon, strategies and techniques to use rely on the translator's decision and hence, they generate different effects. In Holm's version, it is not uncommon to see translations that keep basically the same order and structure of the original words. It is clearly an act of pursuing adequacy in style. Conversely, in Han's version, their orders are mostly disrupted, which seeks to be better received by the audience, an act of chasing acceptability. This can be supported by numerous examples, for instance, the translation of “祖王骑马又持弓”. Holm basically maintained the sequence as the source text: “The mother's child rode a horse and held a bow in hand”. While Han repositioned elements: “Now carrying bows Prince Cojvuengz is riding on a horse”.

Furthermore, the intended audience's suitability should be considered. As stated in Han's book, his translation is to inherit the rich cultural and ideological content of the *The Epic of Baeuqlongdoh*, expand its influence, and engage in cultural exchange and mutual learning with cultures of various ethnic groups. Simply put, most of its target readers are the general public without relative academic backgrounds. Thus, the book should be easy to read, with accessible language and concepts that cater to

a broader audience. The goal is to ensure that individuals without specialized knowledge can easily understand and engage with the material. This consideration somehow tilts the translator more to the acceptability side. In Holm's case, his translation is a result of a research project, which aims to make accessible the work of considerable cultural importance and explore how the Zhuang language has been represented in the Chinese scripts. To put it simply, his translation is intended for researchers of relative academic fields. This requires a translation that remains close to the source text both in meaning and in form, which leans the translator more toward prioritizing adequacy.

6. Conclusion

The impact of translation norms is complex and multifaceted. It is almost impossible to list out every linguistic phenomenon that is affected by which specific translation norm in a translation practice. One reason is that, sometimes it is hard to distinguish translation norms from personal translation styles. Another reason is that translation norms evolve over time and across different contexts. Nevertheless, it is still meaningful to study translation norms, as they offer insights into cultural shifts and facilitate cultural exchange.

Before starting a translation, the translator has to choose an overall strategy that balances adequacy and acceptability, which is also the essence of what Toury proposed as initial norms. Han's translation leans more to the acceptability side in order to broaden its readership, whereas Holm's version inclines more toward adequacy for research needs. In terms of the preliminary norms, both translators comply with the relative law of their country and the rules of their respective publishing houses, which influences their translation in a macro way. Moreover, it is reasonable to infer that Chinese, the intermediate language in this case, is well-received by readers, considering the positive reception of both books. Operational norms as well as the other two norms are interconnected and not without exceptions. Some translation techniques with a clear "adequacy" characteristic are found in Han's translation and, similarly "acceptability" attempts are not rare in Holm's translation.

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