

Original Paper

Research on the Translation Strategies of Northeast Chinese
Literature from the Perspective of New Rhetoric
—Taking Ge Haowen’s English Translation of *Tales of Hulan*

River as an Example

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Abstract

Translation of Northeast Chinese literature that has gained much attention is now a key area of academic study. Writers from Northeast China, like Xiao Hong, had created many literary works of this area. Tales of Hulan River, translated by Ge Haowen, has achieved considerable circulation abroad, facilitating effective cross-cultural communication. In this work, Xiao Hong adopted many rhetorical devices, with irony standing out as a characteristic feature of Northeastern literary rhetoric. Those irony in Tales of Hulan River shows Xiao Hong’s critiques of China’s society when she lived and composed her works. This paper integrates the identity theory of new rhetoric and examines the concepts of situational irony and verbal irony, offering specific empirical analyses of the translation strategies employed by Ge Haowen to effectively convey the ironic rhetoric in Tales of Hulan River, alongside its inherent critical reflections.

Keywords

irony, new rhetoric, Tales of Hulan River, Northeast Chinese Literature

1. Introduction

For an extended period, literature from Northeast China has been a significant focus of literary studies both within China and internationally. Its history imbues these works a strong sense of their era. Therefore, as China currently promotes cultural “going global”, translating Northeast Chinese literature now is supposed to obtain the academic attention. Rhetoric, due to its unique forms, often brings about the effective expressive results in literary works, favored by writers (Qin, 2023). Meanwhile, this method is also used in Northeast Chinese literature. Thus, studying rhetoric translation in Northeast Chinese literary context is of considerable importance.

Xiao Hong is a representative writer of the Northeastern Chinese literary group, and *Tales of Hulan River* is her melancholic reflection and depiction of childhood memories, portraying the lives of people in a northern town who lived in confusion and without freedom, embodying the silent spirit of the populace. This work was translated and disseminated overseas by Ge Haowen. Scholars have studied the literary rhetoric in *Tales of Hulan River*. In translation studies, Liu Ronghua and Chen Wen (2023) adopted Chesterman’s ethic to discuss the translating cultural terms in Ge’s version. Zhao Yiran and Cui Dan (2023) observe this issue from the perspective of ecological translation studies. They examined how Ge rebuilt folk customs at different levels. Yang Dongmei (2023) pinpoints Xiao Hong implements many rhetorical devices, including plain narrative, repetition, and other figures of speech, to create a unique and poetic language style that made the tone more expressive. Overall, although existing research has systematically analyzed aspects such as translation, rhetoric, poetic education, and dissemination, there is still a lack of integrated studies linking these areas, as well as a lack of research based on reader reception.

The New Rhetoric theory emerged in the mid-twentieth century, prominently represented by Kenneth Burke. This theory suggests that rhetoric can convey discursive power. It emphasizes the symbolic force of language, asserting that a relationship can exist between the speaker and audience. This relationship is based on mutual understanding and shared meaning. It says the “speaker” and “audience” can cultivate this relationship (Tian, 2015). In this context, translation is seen as a rhetorical act in which the translator must understand the original work’s rhetorical goals and then recreate the context (Yan et al., 2023). New rhetoric focuses on the audience. This gives a framework for analyzing audience responses. Burke’s “Dramatistic Pentad” consists of five parts: act, scene, agent, agency, purpose. Those serve as a valuable tool for examining situational irony. By investigating the contradictions among these five parts can show the satire in the text. New rhetoric also stresses “hierarchy of values” and “assumptions of consensus”. This exploration is particularly crucial when translating irony across different cultures. Therefore, this paper will analyze Ge Haowen’s translation of ironic rhetoric in *Tales of Hulan River* through the lens of new rhetoric theory, examining whether his rhetorical translation strategies can serve as a reference for translating the rhetoric of Northeastern

literature.

2. Irony Rhetoric and its Manifestation in The Tale of Hulan River

In literature, irony is not merely considered as a device. It also acts as a way for writers to observe and represent the world. In classical times, irony only acts as a dramatic principle but over time, its meaning has evolved gradually. In the 20th century, the “New Criticism” school regarded irony as a basic principle of poetic language. From that time, irony’s scope had been widened, broadening the scope of irony from a micro-level rhetorical technique to a principle that governs the overall structure of a text. In the contemporary literary criticism, irony is generally categorized into two types: situational irony and verbal irony. The former refers to instances where a speaker intentionally says something that contradicts their true meaning, while the latter highlights the ironic contrast between how events unfold and what people expect (Mao, 2014).

Many Northeastern literary profoundly reflect irony for it is a common technique. For example, Northeast writers have mixed feelings about ethnic identity and shamanic culture. They often use cultural traits to create irony. This gives their ideas a more dialectical meaning. In *Last Quarter of the Moon*, Shamans save people but lose their own children. Yet they still cannot prevent the decline of their nation in the face of irresistible forces and modern medicine. This contrast is a kind of tragic irony. Moreover, in *Rouge Street*, there is a part called *Moses in the Plains*. This plot describes such a situation: when everyone praises the father as a hero, the son says, “Come on, that’s just because the factory boiler exploded, and he stayed too close” (Shuang, 2021, p. 288). This pulls the reader from heroism back to workplace injury reality with an absurd feeling. Current Northeastern writing shows three traits for irony: rich folk elements, plain but heavy language, and a tone mixing sorrow and joy. These three traits allow Northeastern works to mix suffering with humor, which also creates strong aesthetic tension.

Tales of Hulan River also adopts the irony prominently. For example, the novel depicts that Tuanyuan’s mother-in-law invited a shaman to treat her, which leads to her death. Through this plot, the author employs a seemingly simple yet subtly sharp expression to satirize and expose folk superstitions while also reflecting the ignorance of the masses and the tragic fate of the people at the time. The poetic beauty in Xiao Hong’s novels does not just lie in language form. It also exists in her adoption of ironic rhetoric (Mao, 2014). These elements are interwoven, creating a strong nationalistic critique and establishing a “sympathetic identification” with readers while maintaining a “contrasting identification” with the characters. In translation, conveying this complex emotional nuance accurately through language choice presents a significant challenge for translators.

3. Analysis of the Translation Strategies for Irony in ‘Chronicle of Hulan River’ from the Perspective of New Rhetoric

The overall irony in *Tales of Hulan River* comprises four ironic patterns: the first pattern pertains to the irony within the content of the text; the second relates to the irony found in specific situations; the third involves the irony in characters’ actions; and the fourth is verbal irony (Wang, 2016). Upon closer examination, the novel mainly uses situational irony and linguistic satire. Ge Haowen is a key translator of modern Chinese literature. His translation of Xiao Hong’s works shows great language skill and rhetorical sense. This paper uses new rhetoric to analyze examples of irony in the English translation investigating the translation strategies utilized by the translator to address various forms of irony and how these decisions successfully communicate the ironic aspects of the original text in the English rendition.

3.1 Translation Analysis

3.1.1 Situational Irony

Situational irony in *Tales of Hulan River* is mainly expressed through dramatic irony. Dramatic irony comes from tension. The necessary of dramatic irony lies in the tension between the audience’s knowledge and the characters’ lack of awareness (Wang, 2021). Ge Haowen uses two main techniques to increase this tension. First, he uses formal, informal, and colloquial expressions, which shows different characters’ social traits. Second, he mixes expression modes for ironic effect. This emphasises the contrast between appearance and essence (Qin, 2023).

Example1:

Source Text: 再说那一进胡同口就被挨家摸索过来的麻花, 被提到另外的胡同里去, 倒底也卖掉了。一个已经脱完了牙齿的老太太买了其中的一个, 用纸裹着拿到屋子去了。她一边走着一边说: “这麻花真干净, 油亮亮的。”

而后招呼了她的小孙子, 快来吧。

那卖麻花的人看了老太太很喜欢这麻花, 于是就又说:

“是刚出锅的, 还热忽着哩!” (《呼兰河传》, 1940: 17)

Target Text: As for the remainder of twists that had been taken into the lane to **be handled and felt by nearly everyone**, they are then carried over into the next lane and eventually sold. A toothless old woman buys one of them and carries it back wrapped in a piece of paper, saying:

“This sesame twist is certainly clean, all nice and oily.”

Then she calls out to her grandchild to hurry on over.

The peddler, seeing how **pleased** the old woman is, says to her:

“It’s just come from the pan, still nice and warm!” (*Tales of Hulan River*, 1988: 127)

Analysis: This part describes a scene in which the seller of fried twists took those goods, which had already been handled one after another by the families along an entire alley, to another alley and

eventually sold them all. Ge Haowen reviews the scene in view of ironic tone. He builds a small lexical matrix by translating “挨家摸索过来的麻花” (referring to twists that had been taken into the lane to be handled and felt by nearly everyone) as “handled and felt by nearly everyone”. He does not just use “chosen”, but use the combination “handled and felt”. “Handle” shows the selecting process, while “feel” showing the twists were touched by many people. This translating methodology allows foreign readers to resonate with the content and deepen their comprehension of the truth that the dough is already unsanitary. Moreover, these two verbs create a semantic field of physical contact which makes the implication of “uncleanliness” self-evident, forming a hygiene paradox with the following elderly woman’s praise of “certainly clean”. Also, these verbs foreshadow the later hygiene paradox. They show a cruel reality that residents deceived the weak for gain as well as themselves.

The word “pleased” encompasses the dual meanings of “feeling happy” and “feeling satisfied”. Ge Haowen translates “喜欢” as “pleased”. He does not use “favor” or “like”. This shows the old woman’s satisfaction with the look of fried twists. Her sense of fulfillment stood in stark contrast to these distorted and unhealthy realities, further emphasizing the dramatic tension between surface events and underlying truths. Moreover, the irony arises from the conflict between the elderly woman’s assertion of “cleanliness” and the reality grasped by the reader. Ge’s brilliance is evident in his nuanced understanding of the character’s psychology: by translating “喜欢” as “pleased”, the author demonstrates her satisfaction with the product. And this also shows her feeling that she regarded herself as a “savvy consumer” with a small benefit. This irony highlights “unsanitary” practices, showing a deeper human tragedy—the weak may exploit the weaker, who may also become accomplices unknowingly. Thus, the translation conveys Xiao Hong’s original ironic intention while revealing to foreign readers the darker aspects of human nature and the struggles of the weak during that period.

This translation adopts a collaborative narrative approach for it implements such key words like “handled/felt” (contamination), “clean/oily” (surface), “pleased” (satisfaction), and “warm” (misattribution), which thus allows the three layers of irony present in the original text—“false hygiene rationalization”, “exploitation of the vulnerable”, and “self-deception mechanisms” to resonate effectively. It shows the darkest parts of survival for marginalized groups. From new rhetoric’s “identification” theory, this translation asks readers to comprehend deeper than just be curious about folk customs. It asks them to join Xiao Hong’s mind. They should reach a critical consensus about human nature and harsh survival. This helps readers to see and engage with the translation’s rhetorical intent.

3.1.2 Verbal Irony

Verbal irony as a key device in Northeast Chinese literature is prominently used here. In *Tales of Hulan River*, this irony often uses “opposite meanings”. It uses praise to convey criticism. This highlights the author’s critique of local self-deception, showing people’s tendency to accept their living conditions

passively. Stylistically, Ge adopts the rich vocabulary that offers English readers a clarified and interpretive framework, and also shows the translator's effort to acknowledge the irony and adapt it. For example, calling a "quagmire" as "welfare" is verbal irony. It exemplifies the verbal irony of "using solemn words humorously and praise sarcastically".

Example1:

Source Text: 第二条就是这猪肉的问题了, 若没有这泥坑子, 可怎么吃瘟猪肉呢? 吃是可以吃的, 但是可怎么说法呢? 真正说是吃的瘟猪肉, 岂不太不讲卫生了吗? 有这泥坑子可就好办, 可以使瘟猪变成淹猪, 居民们买起肉来, 第一经济, 第二也不算什么不卫生。(Tales of Hulan River, 1940: 12)

Target Text: The second sample is in relation to the matter of pork. Were there no quagmire, how could they have their plague pork? Naturally, they might still eat it, but how do they explain it away? If they simply admit they are eating plague pork, it would be too unsanitary for words. But the quagmire solves their problem: plague pork becomes the meat of drowned pigs, which means that when they buy the meat, not only is it economical, but there are no sanitation problems either. (Tales of Hulan River, 1988: 112)

Analysis: Frankly, "Quagmire" is rarely adopted in translations. It means "mud pit", which also designates an "inescapable bad situation". By adopting this expression, Ge aims to tell English readers the mud pit has special meaning since the residents' behavior hurts their health. It is voluntary, and this self-deception traps them in an "inescapable bad situation"—falling ill after eating sick pigs.

In the following text, Gao Haowen continued to adopt the word "quagmire" to imply the fact that the "mud pit" can "solve the problem". However, when considering its broader meaning as an "inescapable hazardous situation", the mud pit juxtaposes with "solving the problem", which thus creates an incongruity that underscores the author's mockery and irony regarding the residents' self-deceptive actions. Furthermore, Gao Haowen adapts the phrase "有这泥坑可就好办了" into "But the quagmire solves their problem", which makes the translation more relatable to Western readers' cultural backgrounds and language habits. This fits western readers' cultural expectation and language usage habits. It improves readability since it vividly demonstrates the residents' absurd behaviors, while helping foreign readers see Xiao Hong's critique of their rigid thinking.

Another part in Chapter Five shows a mother-in-law abusing her daughter-in-law. Through seemingly plain language, the author reveals that society at the time commonly accepted such behavior as natural, despite the underlying illogical and inhumane aspects. Xiao Hong uses an "as it should be" tone, sharpened her satire of pedantic social norms. Ge Haowen captured the original's ironic intent and employed verbal irony in translation to convey Xiao Hong's criticism of public apathy.

Example2:

Source Text: 若是那小团圆媳妇刚来的时候，那就非先抓过她来打一顿再说。(*Tales of Hulan River*, 1940: 108)

Target Text: Now if she'd just then arrived at their house, **of course** her mother-in-law could have grabbed her, administered a beating, and let the chips fall where they may. (*Tales of Hulan River*, 1988: 219)

Analysis: “Of course” here has been translated in the strongly ironic tone, which suggests “naturally”. It implies that everyone knows this or it is unsurprising. In this context, “of course” seems to say beating a new child bride is “natural”. This tells western readers society then accepted mothers-in-law bullying daughters-in-law. This signals to Western readers that, at the time, society accepted the idea that mothers-in-law could bullying and assault their daughters-in-law without cause—a social consensus. However, this “consensus” is, in reality, completely illogical and represents nothing more than inhumane abuse. By retaining the original sentence structure and adding “of course”, which carries an ironic undertone in a western context, the translator effectively signals to western readers. This translation helps readers unfamiliar with such social customs overcome cultural barriers, recognize its inhumane nature, accurately convey its subtle satire, and express the author’s critique of societal indifference and rigidity.

From Neo-Rhetoric’s “audience alignment” theory, the rhetorical choices made here are not acts of unfaithfulness; rather, they represent a form of rhetorical compensation. They use cues to guide readers to correct interpretation, which shows the translator’s balance. Ge Haowen grasps the satire and adapts it for the audience, and also uses localization principles, which thus helps western readers access the text for it conveys the author’s satirical undertones well, enabling overseas readers to grasp Xiao Hong’s critique of contemporary people’s foolish behaviors. Thus, this process fosters intellectual alignment between the readers and the author.

4. Conclusion

As a typical rhetorical device in *Tales of Hulan River*, irony stands out as the most prominent literary feature in Xiao Hong’s works, directly embodying her critical spirit and aesthetic tension. This paper examines the ironic rhetoric in Ge Haowen’s English translation of *Tales of Hulan River* from a fresh rhetorical perspective. It explores situational irony and linguistic irony, demonstrating how Ge Haowen reconstructs and intensifies ironic effects through carefully crafted language within specific contexts.

The core principle of this rhetorical approach is “reader-centered”, viewing the translation process as an activity of the translator that ultimately seeks to resonate with readers through “identification”. This approach is strikingly evident in the translator’s strategy, whose skillful techniques create tension between different meanings. This allows readers to recognize the contradiction between fictional

characters' appearances and their true nature, thereby fostering genuine resonance. Furthermore, Gao Haowen employs parenthetical remarks and puns—such as “quagmire”—as markers of irony to convey linguistic satire. This approach maintains the surface logic of the translation while enhancing accessibility and providing critical cues. As a result, readers can better understand the author's intent, achieving “audience recognition”.

Overall, Ge Haowen's translation effectively conveys Xiao Hong's ironic critique of national character. To a certain extent, it also achieves a creative linguistic transformation, gaining new rhetorical power within a cross-cultural context. This can be regarded as a significant practice of cross-cultural rhetorical translation. Such a model may provide an effective pathway for the international dissemination of Northeastern Chinese literature and modern Chinese literature. From the perspective of “new rhetoric”, it could serve as a valuable reference for future research in literary translation and literary criticism.

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Notes

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