The Image of Jews Reconstructed in A Chinese Translation of

*Oliver Twist* from the Perspective of Imagology*

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The image of Jews, as the “other”, constructed in *Oliver Twist* by Dickens and reconstructed in its Chinese translation by Wen’an He (1977/1997)¹ is studied at the level of lexical items from the perspective of imagology in this paper. Lexical items involving the image of Fagin, the representative of Jews, are negative in the source work. In translating the lexical items to reconstruct Fagin’s image, the translator retains the features of irony and vulgarity carried with them. So, the image of Fagin is generally transported into the target culture basically unchanged. However, due to the translator’s individual reason or the social background of China at that time, those lexical items with religious connotation in the source text are translated without explanation, and as a result, the image of Jews constructed by this kind of lexical items fails to be conveyed to the target readers.

*Keywords:* image of Jews, imagology, lexical items, *Oliver Twist*, Chinese translation

**Overview of The Image of Jews in *Oliver Twist***

*Oliver Twist*, Dickens’ second novel engaging in social criticism, was initially published in monthly installments from 1837 to 1839. It is regarded as a critique of the London Victorian society which witnessed the most far-reaching social transformation of England: industrialization. This social transformation was accompanied by both prosperity and harsh problems. The main purpose of *Oliver Twist* was to present the suffering of the poor and the hypocrisy of the authorities whose New Poor Law policy and workhouse system worsened their standard of living (Gholami & Joodaki, 2014). As a result of hunger and corruption from criminals like Fagin, some of the impoverished children, especially orphans, committed criminal acts.

This novel earned Dickens a reputation for its realistic descriptions, but also attracted criticism due to Dickens’ anti-Semitic construction of the Jewish antagonist, Fagin. In *Oliver Twist*, Fagin is a character that is evil and will barely be construed to be good. “In his portrayal of Fagin’s villainy, Dickens, as a young writer, chose to rely on ready-made, deeply rooted associations to a supposedly specifically Jewish brand of villainy” (Heller cited in Butterworth, 2009, p. 218). Fagin and Jews in general are usually interpreted as the incarnation of evil from outside (appearance) to the inside (mental). The repeated use of the lexical item “the Jew” presents Jews

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in general as hideous and villainous. In 1863, Mrs. Davis, a Jewish acquaintance of Dickens and the buyer of Dickens’ house in London, wrote to him and complained about the construction of the image of Fagin. As a positive response, Dickens made a subtle revision in the 1867 edition, in which he substituted the term “the Jew” for Fagin’s name or the pronoun “he” in some chapters. However, Susan Meyer argues that “he lessened the frequency with which the term ‘the Jew’ was used for Fagin, […]”. But given that Dickens did this much, why did he not do more?” (Meyer, 2005, p. 240). As a novelist who “grew out of an era and a literary tradition which was predominantly anti-Semitic” (Stone, 1959, p. 225), Dickens was inevitably influenced by the stereotype of Jews in creating the figure of Fagin. “Associated as it was with the history of the marginalization of the Jews, Fagin’s ethnicity was the more problematic as the novel related it to crime and child abuse, a disturbing connection that has stirred sensitivities to this day” (Paganoni, 2010, p. 307).

### The Selected Chinese Translation of *Oliver Twist*

In China, it was not until the first translations came out in 1908 that this literary work became widely known. Since then, various Chinese translations have been produced. Focusing on the translation by Wen’an He (1977/1997), this paper sets to discover how the image of Jews was reconstructed in it from the perspective of imagology and in what ways, if any, it was adapted to the Chinese target culture. In the time when Wen’an He translated *Oliver Twist*, the society had just gone through a turbulence of Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Its concern was beyond the cultural field, becoming a struggle of political powers and indicating the authorities’ protection of the socialist regime in China at that time. Intellectuals, together with the people who were regarded as “class enemies” and those with connections to the West or the former Nationalist government, led a harsh life. “[They] were beaten, committed suicide, or died of their injuries or privation” (Spence, 2001, p. 603). The translator Wen’an He was among the victims of this violence.

The years 1966-1976 were a politically sensitive period, during which almost no foreign literary work was translated or published due to the grim political situation. Though the Cultural Revolution was almost at its end when Wen’an He produced his translation, the trauma caused by this movement to the intellectuals, including Wen’an He, was difficult to erase. At that time, the people had to avoid activities which might raise suspicion that they were betraying the socialist political system. On the one hand, in such a sensitive political and social situation, the selection of a Western literary work for translation affected not only the practice of translation but also the fate of the translator. On the other hand, the Chinese at that time held the belief that a communist society was the ultimate end of social progression, providing a good material life for all people while capitalistic society was responsible for the wide gaps between the rich and the poor. So, Wen’an He’s translation of *Oliver Twist* at that time should be a thought-through work, catering to the political and social situation.

It does not mean that the translator’s decision to translate this work and his effort in doing so were meant to flatter the regime at that time. But it cannot be denied that the contribution of this novel to the spread of criticism against capitalist society effectively protected Wen’an He from the risk of being taken as either “rightist” or “counter revolutionist”. The novel has its value, to a large extent, in revealing the dark side of capitalism. This will be the main guiding principle in conducting further analysis of his translation, trying to understand the translator’s handling of the lexical items in reconstructing the image of Fagin.
Analysis of the Image of Jews Reconstructed in Wen’an He’s Translation from the Perspective of Imagology

The contemporary imagologist Pageaux proposed that the analysis of the image of the “other” can be conducted from intrinsic text-based analysis and extrinsic contextual analysis. The former, which focuses on the text itself, can be conducted on three levels: lexical items, larger textual units reflecting hierarchical relations between “self” and “other”, and the entire plot. Based on the origin of the lexical items used by a nation or a culture to directly or indirectly transmit the image of the “other”, Pageaux (1989) distinguishes between two categories: (1) lexical items originating from the culture to which the image-creator belongs; (2) those derived from the “other”’s own culture and transferred into the text by the image-creator without “translating” it. As both religious and ethnic “other”, the Jews, as Fagin being the representative, is constructed by certain type of lexical items in *Oliver Twist*, which will be analyzed to figure out in which culture they originate, the “self”s (the author’s) or the “other”s (the Jews’). Due to the involvement of the translator and the culture he represents, lexical items reconstructing the image may originate from this newly involved culture and function as the Chinese equivalents of those employed in the source text.

Curse words against Fagin, or Jews, are a feature and other lexical items involving the image of Fagin are also negative ones in this work. The first and foremost eye-catching term is “the (merry) old gentleman” which repeatedly appears in Chapter 9 and 12 in both chapter-titles and text. According to Paganoni (2010), “‘the merry old gentleman’ is a traditional name for the devil, Satan” (Paganoni, 2010, p. 310). Since it is a traditional use, it should be considered a stereotyped item, but for the image of Satan, not for that of Jews. By calling Fagin so, Dickens combines several characteristics of this figure: “Fagin, the ‘merry old gentleman’—a term commonly used to describe the devil—is an extraordinary compound of the supernatural, extreme realism, and macabre humor” (Wilson, 1966, p. 23). However, a euphemistic use of “the merry old gentleman” seems not clear-cut enough for Dickens’ attempt to combine the image of the Jew with that of Satan, the devil; he straightforwardly replaces the word “gentleman” in the stereotypical expression with “Jew” in Chapter 15. The image of the Jew and that of Satan are thus combined in the author’s newly coined item “the merry old Jew”. From the perspective of religion, Dickens employs this lexical item to cast Fagin’s role of corrupting the innocent Christian children as Satan does. “Dickens reserves his heaviest ironic strategy for the leader of this criminal world, describing Fagin as a ‘merry old gentleman’ of ‘virtuous precepts’ and ‘stern morality’” (Furneaux, 2005, p. 222).

The problem that a lexical item originating in a different culture may arouse is that the readers cannot understand the lexical item itself and the image it constructs. This is especially so when the lexical item is transplanted directly into the target culture or its literal meaning is given without explaining its cultural connotations. In He’s translation, the item “merry old gentleman” is translated as “快活的老绅士 (kuaihuo de lao shenshi)” and is repeatedly used. Actually, it is just the literal translation of “the merry old gentleman” into Chinese, but due to the cultural difference, i.e. that Christianity is not prevailing in the target culture, the target readers are not supposed to be able to figure out its religious meaning. The result is that the target readers cannot combine the image of Fagin with that of evil and connect it with his image as a child-corrupter as soon as this item appears. Also, the readers may get the impression that Fagin is really a gentleman, which is Oliver’s first impression, though the truth will eventually be revealed. As a result, in a narrow sense, the employment of this
cultural-specific lexical item originating in the author’s culture is likely to fail in reconstructing the image of Fagin; in a wider sense, it hinders the effective communication between the two different cultures (Christian/Western culture and non-Christian/Chinese culture).

The Chinese translation of “the merry old gentleman”, “快活的老绅士 (kuaihuo de lao shenshi)”, does not directly reveal Fagin’s image as child-corrupter, neither does it totally beautify the image of Fagin because the Chinese word “绅士 (shenshi)” is not the exact equivalent of “gentleman”. “绅士 (shenshi)” in 现代汉语词典 (Dictionary of contemporary Chinese) (1983) refers to: (1) 土豪劣绅 (tu Hao lie shen), local tyrants and evil gentry who exploit and bully the common people; (2) 旧时地方上有势力, 有功名的人, 一般是地主或退职官僚 (a man with power or scholarly honor; usually it is used to refer to the landlord or the retired governmental official in ancient China) (Dictionary of contemporary Chinese, 1983, p. 1017, my translation). On the basis of these two explanations, it is clear that the image constructed by the lexical item, “绅士 (shenshi)”, may be either positive or negative. Because of the detachment from the image of Satan and that of ‘child-corrupter’ indicated in the original lexical items, the Chinese translation weakens the negative effect in the original, but it still reconstructs a controversial image of Fagin to the target readers.

“快活的老绅士 (kuaihuo de lao shenshi)” is a sort of literal transplant of the original, “the merry old gentleman”, into the translation. Though this literal translation does not convey the original cultural connotation, it still makes sense. However, not all the literal translations of lexical items originating from the author’s culture are likely to make sense to the target readers. A typical example is “an infernal rich, plundering, thundering old Jew” (Dickens, 2003, p. 106). The employment of a pile of adjectives with negative meanings first indicates the extremely dissatisfied and contemptuous attitude of the speaker. This challenges the translator if he wishes to retain the same effect in the translation. Instead of literally translating these adjectives, the translator has chosen lexical items familiar to the target readers based on the context and the connotations of the original ones. In the translation, too, the translator piles the lexical items: “无法无天, 坐地分赃的混账犹太老财 (wu fa wu tian zuo di fen zang de hunzhang you tai lao cai)”. Wen’an He implies Fagin’s identity as the head of a gang of thieves by the use of a Chinese idiom, “坐地分赃 (zuo di fen zang; free translation: take a share of the spoils without participating personally in the robbery or theft)”. This idiom can be regarded as the equivalent of ‘plundering’ in Chinese, since they both carry the connotation of taking others’ gains. However, the Chinese idiom also reveals Fagin’s identity as a head of a gang of thieves and thus its meaning is clearer and more concise than “plundering”. The employment of these Chinese lexical items reflects the translator’s interpretation of Fagin’s image based on the entire context in the novel.

Also based on the understanding of the context, the ironically applied lexical item “rich” is translated into a relevant or similar Chinese noun “老财 (Lao cai)” which is culture-specific as well as characteristic of its time. First of all, it is a derogatory term, referring to those who hold lots of wealth or land but oppress, exploit and derive benefit from others. It was widely used before the liberation of China when the Chinese still suffered from landlords and led miserable lives. By using this lexical item, the translator reconstructs an image which is not only connected with wealth but is also that of an oppressor. Truly, Fagin possesses “a magnificent gold watch, sparkling with jewels”, “rings, brooches, bracelets, and other articles of jewelries, of such magnificent materials, and costly workmanship, that Oliver had no idea, even of their names” (Dickens, 2003, p. 72), therefore he is rich to some extent. But the way he gets these stuffs is by training children to steal for him and keeping the wealth to
himself, thus exploiting the children. Accordingly, “老财 (Lao cai)”, with its specific cultural connotation, efficaciously and succinctly reconstructs the image of Fagin as an oppressor of the children and the owner of a great fortune. Sikes, who uses this lexical item, clearly aims at mocking Fagin, because Fagin attacks Jack Dawkins with a pot of beer while his stinginess is undisguised. Sikes’ addressing Fagin as “老财 (Lao cai)” is out of mocking Fagin’s stinginess, but he tells the truth without knowing it himself, reminding the readers of Fagin’s private possessions. The translator knows about these possessions, via Oliver’s observation, so “rich” to him and to the target readers is a statement of fact. Therefore, the employment of the Chinese lexical item seems like a choice based on the entire context and its lexical meaning rather than just a literal translation of the original.

In dealing with “an infernal rich, plundering, thundering old Jew”, the translator chooses corresponding equivalents in Chinese for “rich” and “plundering”, taking the context into consideration. As to the translation of “infernal” and “thundering”, while paying attention to the context, the translator’s strategy is free translation. Nevertheless, since the lexical items in the source text are used to construct a negative image of Fagin, the Chinese lexical items serving as replacements have the same effect. Therefore, both “无法无天 (wu fa wu tian)” and “混账 (hunzhang)” here act as kinds of explanatory or descriptive notes of Fagin’s evil image. “无法无天 (wu fa wu tian)” originates in modern China, meaning “无视法纪和天理, 形容人毫无顾忌地胡作非为 (arbitrarily do bad things, disregarding national laws and heavenly justice)” (Dictionary of Contemporary Chinese, 2012, p. 1373, my translation); and it now usually suggests becoming absolutely lawless or running wild. It highlights a person’s disregard of the law and ethics. The employment of this Chinese lexical item “无法无天 (wu fa wu tian)” strengthens Fagin’s criminal activities and also shows Sikes’s displeasure at Fagin’s violent behavior of attacking his fellow with a pot. But Sikes himself is a criminal too; his criticism of Fagin by employing this lexical item disregards the fact that what he does, according to the entire context, is also illegal. Maybe, Fagin’s criminality is more despicable to Sikes. Or, there are classifications among criminals, which will be left aside for now and further explored in the hierarchical relations section. But Sikes’s scorn for both Fagin’s deeds and personality is self-evident and indicates that Fagin is the inferior one compared to Sikes. Another lexical item mentioned above, “混账 (hunzhang)”, is usually used as an offence to criticize unreasonable and shameless speech and behavior. It is not really a Chinese equivalent of any of the original lexical items mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph (infernal rich, plundering, thundering). Taking into consideration the afore-given explanation of “混账 (hunzhang)”, it does not match any of the original ones: “infernal” relates to hell or the underworld; “plundering” is relevant to theft and robbery; and “thundering” originally means making a resounding, loud, deep noise. However, this Chinese lexical item carries with it the effect of vilifying Fagin and shows Sikes’ disdain towards him. The employment of the lexical items “无法无天 (wu fa wu tian)” and “混账 (hunzhang)” side by side retains the style of the source text which is characterized by the piling of adjectives to emphasize the wickedness of Fagin and conveys the abundance of the language in the original.

The translator actually also observes Dickens’s language skills and acknowledges them in his “Afterword”: “狄更斯堪称一位杰出的语言大师, 擅长运用讽刺, 幽默和夸张的手法 (Dickens is an outstanding master of language, who is good at using irony, humor and exaggeration)” (He, 1977/1997, p. 652, my translation). This point is further supported by the lexical items he employs in reconstructing the various aspects of the image of Fagin in the translation. He enriches the lexical items by introducing several translations for the same English word, which share similar meanings but are still distinguishable from each other.
To follow Fagin’s original image as a devil, the translator employs lexical items such as “老恶魔 (lao e mo, page 501)”, “老鬼 (lao gui, page 166/168/216/218)”, “狰狞可怕的幽灵 (zhengningke pa de you ling, page 557)”, “魔鬼 (mogui, page 530/562)”, “鬼东西 (gui dong xi, page 513)”, “怪物 (guaiwu, page 501)” The meaning that lexical items have is not the same in the minds of people with different cultural backgrounds. Through these above-listed lexical items and their contexts, it is evident that regardless of whether they are repeatedly used or appear just once, they are derivatives of “魔 (mo, devil)”, “灵 (ling, spirit)”, “鬼 (gui, ghost)”, and “怪 (guai, monster/demon)”. They bring to light the fact that an evil image in Chinese culture mainly refers to these four categories “魔 (mo, devil)”, “灵 (ling, spirit)”, “鬼 (gui, ghost)”, and “怪 (guai, monster/demon)”, enriching the expression. In general, the reconstructed image of Fagin is consistent with the one in the original, but the translator embodies this evil image in four concrete ways typical of Chinese.

Conclusion

Since lexical items within the framework of imagology are supposed to be unique to the cultures they originate from, the translator has to first interpret the cultural connotations the lexical items carry with them, taking the context into consideration, and then translate them accordingly. In translating the lexical items to reconstruct Fagin’s image, the translator retains the features of irony and vulgarity carried with them. So, generally speaking, the image of Fagin is transported into the target culture basically unchanged.

But in revealing and conveying the connotations of the lexical items, the translator faces problems. A typical example is the loss of the connection between the stereotyped usage of ‘the merry old gentleman’ and the image of Satan in their translations. It is likely that the original author takes for granted that by applying this item the image of Fagin would be automatically linked with that of Satan. This is because Christianity is the common background of most of the readers of the source text. However, this is not the case as regards the Chinese readers. The reason maybe that the translator himself did not realize the connotation in this item or he did not think it a good idea to explain much about Christianity to Chinese readers at a time when things relating to Capitalism might bring trouble to the translator.

However, from the perspective of translation studies, the translation of lexical items constructing the image of ‘other’ requires that the translator should give not only the literal meaning but explain its connotation as well to convey the corresponding image, if he tries to be faithful to the original. This is especially necessary when the target readers are from a totally different culture, lacking the knowledge of both the author’s and the “other’s” culture.

References