

Cultural Topological Isomerism in Gu Zhengkun's Translation of Shakespeare's Sonnets

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Abstract

Shakespeare's sonnets hold a significant place in English and American literature, renowned for their rich cultural connotations and complex emotional expressions, making them a classic subject in translation studies. This paper examines Gu Zhengkun's translation through the lens of cultural topological isomerism, analyzing his translation strategies and their effectiveness in the context of cultural differences between Chinese and English. By closely comparing the cultural symbol transformations in the original text and the translation, the paper explores Gu's handling of topological isomerism ecological, social and religious cultures within Shakespeare's poetry. The findings indicate that Gu Zhengkun often adopts strategies of moderate adjustment and cultural recreation, ensuring that the translation retains the spirit of the original while enhancing its acceptability within the Chinese cultural context. This study offers a new perspective on the cross-cultural translation of Shakespeare's sonnets and provides valuable insights for future translation practice and theoretical research.

Keywords

Shakespeare's Sonnets; Cultural Topology; Isomerism; Literary Translation.

1. Introduction

Shakespeare's sonnets, as treasures of English and American literature, have garnered widespread attention from readers and scholars worldwide. With the deepening of cultural exchanges between China and the West, the translation studies of Shakespeare's sonnets have increasingly demonstrated their academic value. Previous research has primarily focused on translators' styles [12] and the comparative analysis of different translations [2, 7, 11]. Some scholars have also explored the translations of Shakespeare's sonnets, such as Lü Shisheng and Tang Qi [9], who studied the cross-cultural interpretation, poetic value, and untranslatability of Shakespeare's sonnets in Chinese; Kasar, S. Ö. and Tuna, D. [6], who analyzed the form and meaning of Sonnet 130 and its translations from a semiotic perspective; and Hao [5], who examined the reading, translation, and adaptation of Shakespeare's sonnets in China and their impact on modern Chinese poetry. However, there remains a scarcity of research on cultural isomerism in these translations. In recent years, with the introduction of topology theory, the phenomenon of topological isomerism in the cross-cultural translation of cultural symbols has gradually attracted scholarly attention. Nonetheless, specific studies on cultural topological isomerism in Shakespeare's sonnets are still lacking. As an outstanding translator, Gu Zhengkun's translation of Shakespeare's sonnets is particularly noteworthy for its cultural transmission and aesthetic reconstruction. Therefore, this paper intends to conduct an in-depth analysis of the handling of cultural symbols in Gu's translation of Shakespeare's sonnets from the perspective of topological translation studies, exploring how cultural symbols are re-encoded and reinterpreted through translation in different cultural contexts. This study not

only deepens the understanding of the cross-cultural dissemination of Shakespeare's poetry but also provides valuable insights for future translation practices.

2. Shakespeare's Sonnets and Gu Zhengkun

In 16th-century England, sonnets were immensely popular, with many renowned poets, and Shakespeare's sonnets are often regarded as the pinnacle of this form. became a prominent figure in literary translation and comparative studies between Chinese and Western cultures, achieving significant academic success. Born in 1952, he served as a professor, doctoral advisor, and director of the Institute of World Literature at Peking University's School of Foreign Languages, and was honored as a State Council Expert for Special Contributions. His scholarly interests are diverse, including Shakespearean studies, comparative cultural studies, and poetry translation.

Gu's translation of the Sonnets of Shakespeare was published in 1998, highlighting his exceptional translation philosophy in the context of cultural exchange between China and the West. His profound understanding of Chinese literature, calligraphy, classical poetry, and traditional culture deeply influenced his approach to translation. In translating Shakespeare's sonnets, Gu not only adhered to the unique rhythm of the sonnets but also integrated the essence of Chinese poetry's single rhyme throughout. He skillfully balanced tonal variations, rhyme schemes, and language styles, capturing the subtle nuances of Shakespeare's language and finely conveying the emotions and philosophy within the poems. He [4] remarked, the formal translation of early English poetry, characterized by strict meter, elegant diction, and lyrical quality, into ancient Chinese verse yields particularly effective results.

3. Analytical Framework

In *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, American literary critic and translation theorist George Steiner notes that certain elements within a culture, such as specific words, themes, or forms, remain constant. In *Topotranslatology*, Chen Haodong [1] introduces the concept of "topological isomerism" into translation studies by likening the translation process to the isomeric changes of homomorphs in chemistry. He argues that a source text can yield different translations in different translation contexts, similar to how homomorphs exhibit isomerism under varying conditions. In chemistry, homomorphs are compounds with the same molecular formula but different structures. Likewise, in translation, this isomerism reflects the diversity of translations that arise in different contexts. Context, a crucial factor in translation, encompasses both linguistic and non-linguistic elements such as time, space, situation, and sociocultural factors, all of which determine the diversity of translations. The same phrase may yield different translations depending on the context, highlighting the critical role of context in translation. As context shifts, the translated outcome can also display different forms of "isomerism". Nida argues that the commonalities in human history surpass the differences, suggesting the existence of a "shared core" in life experiences and expressions [8]. The concept of a "shared core" in Nida's theory and "topological isomerism" in *Topotranslatology* both point to the idea of "the same fundamental concept expressed through different structural forms". The "homogeneity" and "isomerism" of cultures determine the feasibility of translation, while the topological characteristics of cultural context introduce further possibilities. Translation is not merely a linguistic conversion but also a cultural exchange. Language, as an integral part of culture, reflects certain cultural changes. Although cultural and linguistic changes do not always occur simultaneously, cultural shifts often eventually manifest in language, as even non-linguistic forms of culture are expressed through linguistic symbols. In different cultural contexts, the same phrase may be interpreted differently, leading to varied translations. Due to the differing cultural contexts of the source and target texts, or the translator's own cultural

background, a homogeneous element may be imbued with different cultural connotations, resulting in isomeric outcomes. In *Language, Culture, and Translation*, Nida [10] categorizes culture into five types: ecological culture, material culture, social culture, religious culture, and linguistic culture. In Shakespeare's sonnets, there is a deep level of cultural transformation and structural adjustment related to ecological, social, and religious aspects. Therefore, selecting these three dimensions for discussing "topological isomerism" is both representative and justifiable. This study will explore the "topological isomerism" in the translation of sonnets from the perspectives of ecological culture, social culture, and religious culture.

4. Analysis of Topological Isomerism in Gu's Translation within Multicultural Contexts

Through a careful comparison of the cultural transformations between the original text and its translation, this paper will discuss the "topological isomerism" in Gu's translation of sonnets from the perspectives of ecological culture, social culture, and religious culture, as categorized by Nida's five types of culture.

4.1. Reflection of Ecological Isomerism through Natural Imagery

In their quest for survival and development, ancient people gathered fruits, fished, hunted, and gradually mastered the techniques of agriculture and animal domestication. These activities were closely related to the ecosystem and drove the evolution of social civilization. Language, as a carrier of culture, faithfully recorded this process, embedding a wealth of vocabulary that reflects the ecosystem and endowing it with unique cultural connotations. Despite the ecological similarities, Eastern and Western cultures often assigned different emotions and symbolic meanings to the same species of plants and animals, or even used different plants and natural imagery to express similar emotions, due to cultural differences. Human ecological culture is primarily composed of geographical environment, climate change, and flora and fauna. The following discussion explores Gu's translation approach from the perspective of homotopic isomerism in natural imagery within the cultural context.

In Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, Gu's translation demonstrates a topological isomerism approach to ecological culture, particularly in the handling of natural imagery, which preserves the core metaphors of the original text while adapting to Chinese cultural expression norms. This translation strategy retains the original ambiance of Shakespeare's work while making cultural and linguistic adaptations that enhance the translation's cultural resonance. Shakespeare's original text employs rich natural imagery, such as "yellow leaves" and "cold", to metaphorically depict the late stages of life and aging. In Western culture, such imagery commonly symbolizes the decline of life and its inevitable end. For example, "yellow leaves" represent autumn, foreshadowing the end of life, while "cold" symbolizes the harshness of life and the impending approach of death. Gu [3] translates "yellow leaves, or none, or few" as "零落的黄叶" and "cold" as "寒风中索索发抖". This translation not only retains the natural metaphors of the original text but also enhances the imagery's cultural affinity by using expressions more familiar to Chinese readers. In Chinese, "零落的黄叶" and "寒风中索索发抖" similarly convey the meanings of life's decline and the passage of time, ensuring that the translation aligns with the emotional and cultural resonance of the original work. When dealing with the metaphor of death, Shakespeare likens "night" to "Death's second self", suggesting that the quiet and closure of night are akin to death. Gu [3] translates this as "如死神的替身将一切锁进牢囚", making adjustments that are more vivid and concrete. While "night" as a natural phenomenon holds symbolic significance in both Eastern and Western cultures, the phrase "死神的替身" in Chinese emphasizes the inescapability and finality of death more strongly. This translation approach adapts the metaphor to be more vivid and specific in Chinese expression, rather than merely

abstract. This treatment not only highlights the unique Chinese cultural understanding of death but also adjusts the translation to align with the cultural background and aesthetic preferences of the target audience. Through cultural adaptation and linguistic adjustment, Gu's translation of Shakespeare's sonnets achieves a topological isomerism of ecological cultural metaphors. This translation remains faithful to the core meaning of the original while making the text more accessible and relatable to Chinese readers. Gu's meticulous translation strategy reflects a deep understanding of ecological cultural metaphors and respect for the target language's cultural context, demonstrating flexibility and cultural adaptability in the translation process.

4.2. Reflections of Isomerism in Social Cultural Elements

Social culture encompasses various elements that permeate all aspects of societal life. According to cultural scholars, social culture can be categorized into three layers: institutional culture, behavioral culture, and mental culture. Institutional culture involves societal norms, institutions, and laws that regulate human behavior; behavioral culture refers to habitual patterns in interpersonal interactions, such as customs and religious beliefs; mental culture includes subjective aspects like ways of thinking, social attitudes, and value systems. This discussion will examine the isomerism of mental and behavioral culture within the context of Gu's translations.

In his translation of Shakespeare's Sonnet 42, Gu Zhengkun [3] renders the line "and for my sake even so doth she abuse me, stuffing my friend for my sake to approve her" as "她骗我，也因为她对我无限倾心，所以才让我的朋友与她试想云雨情", which exemplifies a typical case of homogeneous isomerism in translation. A more detailed analysis of this translation is as follows. The original Shakespearean text conveys complex emotions and moral conflicts. The term "abuse" refers to emotional betrayal and deceit, while "stuffing my friend" involves encouraging others (in this case, friends) to engage in inappropriate relationships with one's beloved. These terms directly convey the betrayal and moral fall, with notable negative emotions and strong ethical implications. Gu translates "abuse" as "骗我", which accurately captures the basic concept of deception but weakens the emotional intensity. The term "abuse" usually implies a severe betrayal or misuse, whereas "骗我" is relatively neutral and does not fully convey the original term's strong emotional connotation. This translation approach retains the core meaning of deceit while softening the emotional impact, aligning it more closely with Chinese expression norms. In translating "stuffing my friend", Gu [3] uses the phrase "试想云雨情", which introduces literary and cultural connotations. In Chinese culture, "云雨情" is a euphemistic way to describe intimate relationships, especially emotional closeness. This expression makes the translation more implicit and indirect, consistent with the common stylistic expressions in Chinese literature, thus avoiding direct cultural conflicts. Additionally, this approach makes the translation more suitable for the target audience's cultural expectations and acceptance. Gu's translation, in handling Shakespeare's complex emotions, successfully employs a strategy of homogeneous isomerism by retaining the core content while adjusting cultural elements. This translation achieves a balance by faithfully representing the original's intent while ensuring that it is presented naturally and smoothly in the target culture. Although this adjustment may lead to differences in emotional expression compared to the original, it effectively avoids cultural clashes, allowing the emotional conflicts and ethical dilemmas of Shakespeare's work to be appropriately expressed within the Chinese context.

4.3. Revelation of Cultural Isomerism through Religious Imagery

Religion, as a cultural phenomenon and social ideology, has always been a core component of human culture and holds significant importance across civilizations. The Western term "religion" derives from the Latin "religio", meaning reverence for deities, while in China, religion refers to the worship of deities and ancestors. Despite the differing interpretations of

religion between the East and the West, the essence remains a profound faith in the divine, showcasing a cultural commonality. However, due to differing beliefs and ideologies, religious culture manifests various forms and characteristics within its cultural contexts. The West, primarily Christian, venerates God as the creator, while China, with its prominent Buddhism and Taoism, reflects the diversity and isomerism of religious culture. The following discussion will explore the homogeneous isomerism phenomenon within the religious cultural context of Gu's translations.

In translating Shakespeare's sonnets, Gu Zhengkun emphasizes preserving the original poem's mood and emotions while integrating it into the Chinese cultural context. In Sonnet 73, he combines the original text's religious and philosophical reflections with the emotional expression found in Chinese culture, illustrating the phenomenon of homogeneous isomerism from the perspective of topological cultural translation. Shakespeare's original text explores the transience of life and, through the inevitable acceptance of death, implies a reflection on the eternal salvation of the soul—a concept deeply rooted in Christian culture, particularly in its doctrines of redemption and eternal life. The line "love that well which thou must leave ere long" expresses a heightened appreciation for things that will soon fade, aligning with Christianity's focus on the afterlife and the soul. Gu's translation [3], "看到这一切，你的爱会更加坚贞，爱我吧，我在世的时间不会太久", in some ways, applies "homogeneous isomerism" to the religious elements of the original text. Through topological transformation in emotional expression, he adapts the more philosophical content of the original into an expression more in line with the emotional cognition of Chinese readers, making it resonate with interpersonal relationships in Chinese culture. Furthermore, when addressing the concept of Christian redemption, Gu does not directly incorporate religious terminology. Instead, he evokes resonance through the expression of life's impermanence, which corresponds with the concept of impermanence in Chinese culture. From the perspective of topological translation theory, Gu's translation represents a cultural adaptation of the original text's context, maintaining the continuity of meaning within different cultural backgrounds. While preserving Shakespeare's reflection on the impermanence of life, he ensures that the translation aligns more closely with the emotional logic and thought patterns of Chinese culture. Through this topological cultural perspective of homogeneous isomerism, Gu successfully conveys the original work's spiritual essence while infusing new life into the translation.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines cultural isomerism in Gu Zhengkun's translation of Shakespeare's sonnets through the lens of topological translation theory. It explores how the translator reinterprets the core cultural connotations of Shakespeare's poetry by transforming words, imagery, and emotions across different cultural contexts. The study underscores the significance of cultural topological isomerism in the translation process and its impact on the quality of poetic translation. While offering a novel perspective, this research is limited to specific translations of Shakespeare's sonnets and does not consider other translators' works or the readers' reception of the translations. Nonetheless, it provides valuable insights into the mechanisms of cultural representation in translation and Gu's strategies for managing cultural differences. Future studies could expand to include other translators or examine readers' responses in different cultural contexts. Additionally, the findings could inform translation pedagogy, guiding scholars in translating poetry within complex cultural settings.

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