

On Strategies for Translating Chinese Four-character Expressions into English

Chuanmao Tian

School of Foreign Studies, Yangtze University, Hubei, 434023 P. R. China

Abstract— *The article makes a detailed and comprehensive analysis of Chinese four-character phrases in its definition, classifications, structures, characteristics and functions. Then, it makes an analysis of the reason for the difficulties in translating Chinese four-character phrases, namely the difference of the mode of thinking between Chinese people and Westerners. As for the strategies of translating four-character phrases, this article introduces literal translation, free translation, combination of literal translation and free translation, borrowing and annotation. These strategies can be used as a reference for the practical translation of four-character phrases.*

Keywords— *Chinese; four-character phrase; translation; strategy.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Four-character phrases are a special phenomenon in Chinese. There is hardly any structural pattern corresponding to them in the English language. So the translating of Chinese four-character phrases into English becomes a headache. Mrs. Yang Gladys, a famous translator, once said that the most difficult thing in translation is to translate Chinese four-character idioms into English (Zhuang Yichuan [庄绎传], 1999:326).

Many of China's ancient masterpieces are written in four-character pattern, such as *The Book of Songs*, a classical work of poetry collection. In this work, 305 poems were collected, most of which contain four-character lines. For example, in one poem entitled "Mang" there are as many as 60 four-character phrases, which are neat in structure, pleasant to the ear and clear in meaning, such as "及尔偕老, 老使我怨。淇则有岸, 隰则有泮". However, most of the poems haven't been translated into English. Even in the translated poems, many of them haven't been completely understood and accepted by foreign readers. The reason for this lies in the translation itself. Many classical works are perfect not only in form but also in meaning in Chinese. However, when translated into English, they cannot meet the basic requirement of translating. Thus, sometimes, not only foreign readers but also Chinese readers cannot accept the translated version.

This directly leads to the depression of China's cultural exportation industry. So in order to increase the export of China's literary works, we should further improve our translation quality, especially in the translation of four-character expressions.

In modern times, four-character phrases are frequently used in political and economic speeches and articles. As we all know, Wen Jiabao, the former premier of China, liked to quote the old sayings in his speeches, such as "华山再高, 顶有过路" (No matter how high Mount Hua is, one can always ascend to its top). Having been elected premier of China, Zhou Enlai expressed his view on learning in several four-character expressions: "加紧学习, 抓住中心, 宁精勿杂, 宁专勿多" (step up your study; seize the focus; be an expert instead of Jack of all trades; be professional rather than know-all). These expressions are neat in rhythm as well as vivid and forceful in expressions. They contribute to expressing the Premier's learning attitude perfectly. However, due to the cultural differences to some extent between English and Chinese, we can't simultaneously keep the same form and meaning in English as that in Chinese in translating. If we retain the form, we may lose the original's true meaning; if we focus on the meaning, we may lose its beautiful form. So the translation of four-character phrases is never an easy job in satisfying the two requirements of maintaining both form and meaning at the same time in the target text (TT). We should make further research on the translation of Chinese four-character expressions.

This article intends to make a tentative analysis of Chinese four-character expressions and a systematic probe into the strategies for translating Chinese four-character expressions into English. The translation goal is to produce the same effect (or an effect as close as possible) on the readership of the translation as on the readership of the source text (ST).

The article is composed of four parts. The first part is an introduction to the importance of studying the translation of four-character expressions in Chinese. The second part introduces the definitions, origin, classifications, functions and characteristics of four-character phrases. The third part sums up some principles for translating

Chinese four-character expressions into English by comparing several translators' theories. On the basis of the theory and analysis provided previously, this part further proposes some translating strategies of four-character expressions at two levels: the translation of the four-character expressions with single meaning and the translation of the four-character expressions with double meaning. The last part is the conclusion, which summarizes the whole article structure and content. With the previous discussions, the author hopes that the present article could be enriched in future study and more scholars can take part in the studies on the translation of Chinese four-character phrases.

II. AN INTRODUCTION TO CHINESE FOUR-CHARACTER PHRASES

2.1 Definition and origin of Chinese four-character phrases

In the Chinese language, there exists a unique linguistic phenomenon - a wealth of four-character expressions have been widely used in people's daily communication or formal writings. There is no doubt that they are precious resources of the Chinese language. They add more color and vigor to the Chinese language. Their appearance has the following origins. Some of them are from myths or fables. There are many myths and legends in ancient China, which are of profound meaning and full of instructive values, such as "愚公移山", "守株待兔", "刻舟求剑", and "拔苗助长". Some of them are from historical stories. Ancient China has many famous historical stories and historical events, which were later condensed into four-character idioms, such as "卧薪尝胆", "负荆请罪", "四面楚歌", and "草木皆兵". Some of them are from ancient books or ready-made sentences. For example, "一鼓作气" derives from the sentence "夫战, 勇气也。一鼓作气, 再而衰, 三而竭". Some of them are from people's daily language. For example, "千夫所指" comes from the popular saying "千夫所指, 无病而死".

To know more about four-character expressions, we should first make clear its definition. Many scholars have made different definitions on Chinese four-character expressions. In the book *An Essential Course for Translation from Chinese into English*, Cheng Hongwei (陈宏薇, 2002:41) makes a definition as follows: phrases composed of four Chinese characters are Chinese four-character expressions. It is a very general one. Some scholars view four-character phrases as Chinese idioms; some others think four-character phrases are free phrases which exclude idioms; still some others believe that both

four-character idioms and free four-character phrases can be called as four-character phrases. According to *The Lexical Structure of the Chinese Language* (Zhou Jian [周荐], 2004:153), the four-character structure is the one which contains four Chinese characters. In the narrow sense, four-character phrases mostly refer to classical Chinese idioms, which are fixed in meaning and structure, such as "掩耳盗铃", "揠苗助长", "亡羊补牢" and "守株待兔". However, in a broad sense, they refer to phrases free in their components. They are often used in spoken Chinese, such as "清楚明白", "脱贫致富", "合理规划" and so on. In my opinion, the definition in the dictionary is all-inclusive and widely accepted. So I will discuss the four-character phrases according to it.

2.2 Classification of four-character phrases

Examined from the structure, four-character phrases can be divided into two categories: free four-character phrases and four-character idioms.

2.2.1 Free four-character phrases

Free four-character phrases are composed of four free Chinese characters, which contain only one meaning. The four characters are assembled randomly and temporarily, which can be broken up to create some new phrases. Consequently, the meaning of the phrases is changeable. Examples of this kind are as follows:

- (1)个体经济 individual economy
- (2)精神文明 ethical and cultural progress
- (3)思想深沉 to be deep in thought
- (4)惩治腐败 to combat corruption

The above expressions are all free four-character phrases containing just one meaning. In these phrases, we can change "个体经济" into "集体经济" (collective economy), and "精神文明" into "物质文明" (material progress). Of course, their meaning is changed completely.

In most of these expressions, we can also find a type of four-character phrases which are composed of two parts: a flexible part and a fixed part. Different two words inserted into the fixed part will create different four-character phrases. For example,

大...大...	大恩大德	大吵大闹	大起大落
千...万...	千恩万谢	千言万语	千叮万嘱
...声...气	瓮声瓮气	奶声奶气	细声细气
.....成性	贪婪成性	嗜酒成性	聚敛成性

From the above examples, we can see that this pattern is very productive and makes great contribution to the formation of Chinese four-character phrases.

2.2.2 Four-character idioms

Four-character idioms are customarily set phrases. They are frozen patterns of language allowing little or no variation in form. In other words, none of the four characters can be omitted or changed. However, idioms can be divided into two categories: Four-character idioms with one meaning and four-character idioms with double meanings.

2.2.2.1 Four-character idioms with one meaning

(5)一心一意 whole heartedly

(6)载歌载舞 singing and dancing

(7)实事求是 to seek truth from facts

The above examples are all idioms though they contain only one meaning, namely, the superficial meaning. We cannot change them casually. For example, we cannot change “实事求是” into “实事求是非”.

2.2.2.2 Four-character idioms with double meaning

A good many of four-character idioms have two kinds of meanings - literal meaning and figurative meaning. For instance,

(8)开门见山

Literal meaning: to open the door and see the mountain

Figurative meaning: to come straight to the point

(9)井底之蛙

Literal meaning: to be like a frog at the bottom of a well

Figurative meaning: a person with very limited outlook

(10)老马识途

Literal meaning: an old horse knows the way

Figurative meaning: an old hand is a good guide

(11)一箭双雕

Literal meaning: to kill two birds with one stone

Figurative meaning: to succeed in doing two things by only one action

(12)竭泽而渔

Literal meaning: to drain a pond to get all the fish

Figurative meaning: short-sighted

From the examples above, we can see that, in the idioms with double meanings, the figurative meaning is the essential meaning which conveys the real purpose of a speaker or writer while the literal meaning only provides the figure or the origin of the idiom. In translation, if we only translate the literal meaning, our thought or the speaker may be misunderstood or cannot be understood.

Thus, translating the figurative meaning is the most important ability for all translators.

2.3 Structural analysis of Chinese four-character expressions

Grammatically, Chinese four-character expressions can be divided into five categories: “Subject + Predicate”, “Verb + Object”, “Attribute + Noun”, “Adjective + Complement”, and “Juxtaposition”.

2.3.1 The structure of “subject + predicate”

In English, only verbs can be used as predicates, while in Chinese, words used as predicates are not limited to verbs.

For example,

(13)精力充沛 vigorous/energetic

(14)锋芒毕露 to make a showy display of one's abilities

In the two four-character expressions, “充沛” and “毕露” are all adjectives but used as predicates here. In

most cases verbs are used as predicates. For example,

(15)人才流失 brain drain

(16)笨鸟先飞 A slow sparrow should make an early start--the slow need to start early

In examples (15) and (16), both “流失” and “先飞” are verbs used as predicates.

2.3.2 The structure of “verb + object”

This kind of expressions is made up of verb phrase + noun phrase. For example,

(17)尊重知识 to respect knowledge

(18)增加投资 to increase investment

(19)扩大影响 expand the influence

In the three examples, “尊重”, “增加” and “扩大” are all verb phrases; “知识”, “投资” and “影响” are all noun phrases.

2.3.3 The structure of “attribute + noun”

In the structure of attribute + noun, the noun is the core of the meaning and the attribute acts as a pre-modifier. Words used as attributes are usually adjectives or nouns. For example,

(20)精神文明 spiritual civilization

(21)和谐社会 a harmonious society

2.3.4 The structure of “adjective + complement”

In the structure, the adjectives are the center in form. The modifiers are often used to explain the degrees of the adjectives. Let us look at the following examples,

(22)痛不欲生 overwhelmed with sorrow

(23)惨不忍睹 cannot bear to see

In some expressions of this kind, the modifier is a simile. For example,

(24)胆小如鼠 as timid as a hare

(25)轻如鸿毛 as light as a feather

And in some other expressions the modifier is a hyperbole. For examples,

(26)多如牛毛 countless

(27)胆大包天 extremely bodacious

2.3.5 The structure of juxtaposition

This kind of expressions is made up of two parts which enjoy an equal grammatical status. For example,

(28)风平浪静 calm

(29)简明扼要 concise

(30)灰心丧气 down-hearted

(31)安家落户 to settle down in a place

2.3.6 Reduplicative words

Duplicated words often appear as four-character expressions which are used to emphasize or stress the ideas and feelings. For example,

(32)干干净净 clean

(33)马马虎虎 careless

(34)老老实实 honest

(35)勤勤恳恳 industrious

2.4 Functions of four-character phrases

Four-character phrases, as a kind of lexical unit, play a very important role in both ancient and modern Chinese. In ancient times, four-character phrases were often used in formal writings and communications. They usually appeared in poetry or prose, such as the well-known verse line “关关雎鸠，在河之洲，窈窕淑女，君子好逑” in the *Book of Songs*. They are characterized by parallelism, symmetry and rhyme, which are of high aesthetic value. So ancient people often used them to express their emotion, describe landscape or meditate on the past. For example, “老骥伏枥，志在千里；烈士暮年，壮心不已” which is part of a famous poem by Cao Cao (a famous politician, strategist and a great litterateur during the Three Kingdoms Period). Through the expressions, the poet expressed his ambition and aspiration effectively. Without this four-character pattern, Cao Cao would have had to use more words to express the same meaning but the expression would have been less forceful and impressive.

In modern times, with the economic and political development, four-character phrases are usually used in advertisements, political creeds and slogans to exhort, persuade or educate readers or listeners. Besides, not only in ancient times but also in modern times, Chinese people are used to encouraging or exhorting people by employing

a lot of four-character phrases. So I will discuss the modern functions of four-character phrases in the following section in detail.

2.4.1 To encourage or exhort people

Compared with long sentences, four-character phrases are more concise in diction but contain rich philosophy, which can make a strong impression on readers or listeners. Articles with four-character phrases should be impressive, forceful and persuasive. They are easily memorized and accepted by readers or listeners. For example,

积土成山，风雨兴焉；积水成渊，蛟龙生焉；积善成德，而神明自得，圣心备焉。故不积跬步，无以至千里，不积小流，无以成江海。骐骥一跃，不能十步；弩马一驾，功在不舍。锲而舍之，朽木不折；锲而不舍，金石可镂。(Excerpt from *The Acquisition of Knowledge* by Xunzi)

It is extracted from the article “The Encouragement of Study” by Xunzi, a thinker, educator and literator in the Warring States Period. He wrote it to encourage people to study hard and to be a man of culture. His articles are clear-cut and persuasive, and they are even more forceful and instructive with the help of four-character phrases. Please look at the following example:

一毫之恶，劝人莫作，积善之家，必有余庆，积恶之家，必有余殃。一毫之善，与人方便，善有善报，恶有恶报，莫言不报，时刻未到。举头三尺有神明。小善不积，大德不成。小恶不止，终成大罪。

The author just wants to advise people not to harm the others and do good deeds as many as possible. These four-character phrases help him achieve the purpose. Moreover, they make the whole sentence more smooth, concise and persuasive.

2.4.2 To persuade customers in advertisements

Four-character phrases are indispensable components of the Chinese language. They appear everywhere - in newspapers, magazines, literary works, especially in advertisements. With the high-speed development of China's economy, the pace of life is increasingly rapid. In order to make more money, people don't have much time to read a lot of introductions. They buy goods just

according to occasional impressions or memories. So a piece of clear and eye-catching advertisement is the key to marketing success. One key element in designing advertisements is clarity in meaning. As to the language of advertisements, there are two concerns about clarity: to save the space, cut the costs and make the advertisement as concise as possible so as to achieve the memory value. The neat organization of four-character phrases meets the demand well. Their employment can attract more customers. For example, when people hear such words as “数量有限，欲购从速” (The number of the goods is limited. If you want to buy it, please come early.) and “肉质鲜嫩，酥软可口，油而不腻，老幼皆宜” (The meat is fresh, tender and delicious, fat but not greasy. It's good for all.), they will rush to buy the goods even if they didn't plan to buy them before. It is the result of the powerful four-character phrases in the advertisements.

2.4.3 To educate people and promote knowledge in slogans

In war times, Chinese people often use four-character expressions, such as “保家卫国”，“国家有难，匹夫有责”，“前仆后继”，“决一死战”，and so on, to express their patriotism and determination of defending their motherland. However, nowadays people use them to educate people or promote knowledge. The theme of the 2004 World AIDS Campaign was “Women, Girls, HIV and AIDS” which can be translated into Chinese as “关爱妇女，预防艾滋”. Here only two four-character phrases can convey the theme concisely and properly. The mere eight Chinese characters contain so much information. The translation is not only clear at a glance, but also easily understood and memorable to all people.

2.4.4 To enhance the conciseness and forcefulness of expression in political speeches

In contemporary times, four-character expressions are frequently quoted or created by political leaders. For example, Jiang Zemin, the former Chairman of P. R. China, hoped the officers and soldiers of the army to be “政治合格，军事过硬，作风优良，纪律严明，保障有力” (The armed forces should be qualified politically and competent militarily and have a fine style of work, strict discipline and adequate logistic support.). Zhu Rongji, the former premier of China, expressed his determination at a press conference in several four-character expressions as follows: “不管前面是地雷阵还是万丈深渊，我将勇往直前，义无反顾，鞠躬尽瘁，死而后已” (But no matter what is waiting for me in front of me, being landmines or an abyss, I will blaze my trail

and I will have no hesitation and no misgivings, and I will do my best and contribute, devote all myself to the people and the country until the last day of my life.). These expressions are lucid and lively in rhythm, vivid in image and forceful in tone. Though they are short, they make the speakers' meaning very clear. Moreover, they are easily memorized by listeners. They contribute to expressing the Chairman's political strategies and the Premier's firm determination of serving the motherland faithfully. Their use makes the speeches more powerful, persuasive and appealing.

2.5 Characteristics of four-character phrases

With regard to the language, four-character phrases have five major features including compactness, elegance, varied figures of speech, rhyme and rhythm.

2.5.1 Compactness

As far as the form of four-character phrases is concerned, they are compact. In meaning, as we all know, four-character phrases contain rich philosophy. For example, “从容不迫” and “惊慌失措”, which are a pair of antonyms. The former means that one is so calm and confident when he or she faces urgent difficulties and the latter describes a person who is so scared that he or she doesn't know how to deal with the difficulties. These two phrases vividly indicate two completely different attitudes toward the same situation in the mere eight characters. Here we clearly see the compactness of four-character phrases.

Four-character phrases are the condensation of ideas that makes four-character phrases convenient to be used and easy to be memorized. It is no wonder that Chinese four-character phrases have long been an essential part of the language.

2.5.2 Elegance

In ancient times, the literati had created many classical works containing a lot of four-character phrases, such as “至若春和景明，波澜不惊，上下天光，一碧万顷；沙鸥翔集，锦鳞游泳；岸芷汀兰，郁郁青青。而或长烟一空，皓月千里，浮光跃金，静影沉璧，渔歌互答，此乐何极！登斯楼也，则有心旷神怡，宠辱偕忘，把酒临风，其喜洋洋者矣” in *On Yueyang Tower* by Fan Zhongyan. These four-character phrases are so beautiful in melody that they make us have an immersive feeling. By reading the sentences, we can imagine the Yueyang Tower's beautiful scenery and feel the author's good mood.

Nowadays, contemporary writers may borrow the ready-made four-character phrases from those classical writings, or just extract a part of the original phrases, which are the precious fruit of outstanding writers of long ago. These

phrases are usually of classical simplicity and elegance. One example is from the article "Sister Liuyi" by Bin Xin where there is a sentence like this: "乍暖还寒时候, 常使幼稚无知的我, 起无名的惆怅的那种环境, 六一姊也许还在此中". The four-character phrase "乍暖还寒" is quoted from "Slow, Slow Tune" by Li Qingzhao, a famous poet in the Song Dynasty. The original lines are "乍暖还寒时候, 最难将息。三杯两盏淡酒, 怎敌他晚来风急!". Bin Xin quoted the phrase artfully to make the sentence natural and elegant, resulting in her style of elegance and lucidity. Her unique prose style, called "Bing Xin style" by critics, is lucid and thought-provoking. Moreover, her works have always remained popular with Chinese readers.

2.5.3 Varied Figures of Speech

Four-character expressions are a kind of special expressions rich in various kinds of rhetorical devices, such as simile, metaphor, personification, antithesis, parallelism, hyperbole, and so on. Please look at the following examples and you will have a deeper impression of the diversity of the rhetorical devices in four-character phrases.

2.5.3.1 Simile

Simile often appears in four-character expressions. This kind of rhetorical device is easy to recognize because there is usually a sign - the comparative word "如", "似" or "若" in the expressions. For example,

(36) 光阴似箭 Time flies like an arrow. / How time flies.

(36) 口若悬河 speak volubly

(38) 一贫如洗 as poor as a church mouse

(39) 如花似玉 as pretty as a flower

(40) 欢喜若狂 in an ecstasy of delight

2.5.3.2 Metaphor

A large number of Chinese four-character expressions contain metaphors, especially those four-character idioms with a double meaning. Unlike simile, metaphor doesn't have comparative words but we can get the implied information easily. For example,

(41) 井底之蛙 to be but a frog in a well - a person of narrow view

(42) 草木皆兵 a state of extreme nervousness, as if surrounded by enemies

(43) 亡羊补牢 It's never too late to learn from one's mistakes

(44) 打草惊蛇 beat the grass and frighten away the snake - act rashly and alert the enemy

2.5.3.3 Antithesis

In Classical Chinese, antithesis is a very important figure of speech. It is often used in people's daily communication and formal writings. Influenced by this, countless four-character expressions make use of antithesis. For example,

(45) 物美价廉 fine goods at low prices

(46) 男尊女卑 men are superior and women are inferior

(47) 天涯海角 the end of the earth

(48) 明枪易躲, 暗箭难防 It is easy to dodge a spear in the open, but hard to guard against an arrow shot from hiding - Better an open enemy than a false friend.

(49) 生于忧患, 死于安乐 Life grows out of sorrow and calamity, and death from ease and pleasure.

In these examples, each expression consists of two parts, which are semantically in contrast with each other, such as "物美" and "价廉", "生于忧患" and "死于安乐". Moreover, they have their aesthetic value - the balance of beauty, which makes the expression more pleasant to the ear.

2.5.3.4 Hyperbole

Hyperbole is another rhetorical device frequently used by both ancient and modern Chinese people. When we read classical Chinese poems, we can easily find lines with marvelous hyperboles, such as "桃花潭水深千尺, 不及汪伦送我情", "天长地久有时尽, 此恨绵绵无绝期", "飞流直下三千尺, 疑是银河落九天", and so on. As a traditional language form, a lot of four-character expressions contain hyperboles too. For example,

(50) 闭月羞花 beauty of a woman which outshines the moon and shames the flowers

(51) 举手之劳 the effort needed to raise one's hand - needs only a slight effort

(52) 易如反掌 as easy as turning over the palm - a piece of cake

(53) 多如牛毛 countless

2.5.3.5 Parallelism

All four-character expressions are equal with each other in length and the number of syllables. In order to strengthen the effect of speeches or articles, speakers or writers may put together several Chinese four-character expressions, which are nice-looking, nice-sounding and forceful. The clustering of a group of four-character expressions is parallelism, which is often seen in political and economic speeches or articles. For example,

(54)君子有三戒。少之时，血气未定，戒之在色。

及其壮也，血气方刚，戒之在斗。及其老也，血气既衰，戒之在得。

The meaning of the sentences goes as follows: "There are three things which the superior man guards against. In youth, when the physical powers are not yet settled, he guards against lust. When he is strong and the physical powers are full of vigor, he guards against quarrels. When he is old, and the physical powers are decaying, he guards against covetousness."

(55)非礼勿视，非礼勿听，非礼勿言，非礼勿动。

The sentence may be interpreted as follows: "Look not at what is contrary to propriety; listen not to what is contrary to propriety; speak not what is contrary to propriety; make no movement which is contrary to propriety."

2.5.3.6 Personification

In four-character expressions, personification is widely used, especially in four-character idioms. Personification is a figure of speech that gives human features or feelings to animals, or life and personal attributes to inanimate objects, or to ideas and abstractions. For example,

(56)百花争艳 hundreds of flowers in full bloom together

(57)鼠目寸光 cannot see beyond the length of one's nose - short-sighted

(58)鸦雀无声 in dead silence

2.5.4 Rhyme and rhythm

Rhyme and rhythm make four-character phrases lucid, lively and pleasant to the ear. Many of them are rhymed, such as "兄弟齐心，其力断金" (the strength of unity among brothers can break the gold - unity is power). We can easily recognize the two similar sounds at the end of the two parts which are "心" and "金". They are pronounced as "xin" and "jin" in Chinese mandarin and have the same rhyme /in/. Another example is "水滴石穿，绳锯木断" (constant dripping wears away a stone) where "穿" (*chuan*) and "断" (*duan*) have the same rhyme /uan/. The rhyme makes the four-character phrases pleasant to the ear and easy to remember.

III. PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGIES FOR THE CHINESE FOUR-CHARACTER PHRASE TRANSLATION

3.1 Translation principles

The translation principle is a topic which causes unceasing argument, both at home and abroad from ancient times till today. Countless translators and translation theorists have expressed their viewpoints upon

this issue. Of the various kinds of principles, the following are worth mentioning.

As a great Chinese translator and translation theorist, in 1898, Yan Fu proposed his translation principle in three words on the basis of previous research: faithfulness (信, *xin*), expressiveness (达, *da*) and elegance (雅, *ya*). According to Yan Fu, faithfulness means the full and complete conveying of the original content of thought. Expressiveness demands that the version should be clear and flowing without any grammatical mistakes or confused logic and sense. Elegance refers to the use of classical Chinese before the Han Dynasty. While doing translation, Yan Fu didn't put emphasis on sentence structures and the style of the source text. Instead, he made lots of changes on the basis of preserving the original content. Mr. Yan paid much attention to the faithfulness to the original content, not to the original form which should be sacrificed to preserve the original content if necessary (Zhou Jian [周荐], 2004:8-9).

Alexander Fraser Tytler, the famous translation theorist in British, claims that "I would therefore describe a good translation to be that in which the merit of the original work is completely transfused into another language, and as to be as distinctly apprehended, and as strongly felt, by a native of a country to which that language belongs, as it is by those who speak the language of the original work" (cited in Bassnett and Lefevere, 2001:128). He also put forward the three basic principles of translation as follows: i) a translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work; ii) the style and manner of writing should be of the same character as that of the original; iii) A translation should have all the ease of original composition.

Eugene Nida is a famous translation theorist in the United States. In the book *The Theory and practice of Translation*, he points out that translation should be the representation of the original information, and translators must strive for equivalence rather than identity, namely, "formal equivalence" and "dynamic equivalence" (1964:159). In fact, Nida (1993:5) put emphasis on faithfulness, just as he said in the book *Language, Culture, and Translating*, translation means translating meaning.

Although all scholars' viewpoints on translation principles are different, and the expressions they use for their translation theories are also different, we can find many things in common among their translation theories, and the core of their theories is consistent, if we analyze the essential part of their theories carefully. Here the author of this article concludes the basic ideas on translation principles as follows: i) A translation must be faithful to the original; ii) In order to express the message of the original clearly, sometimes the change of form is

quite necessary; iii) Translators should pay great attention to the readership.

The following part will be devoted to discussing the strategies to translate Chinese four-character expressions into English.

3.2 Translation strategies

In the third chapter, we have classified the Chinese four-character expressions in terms of meaning, grammar structure and rhetoric devices. We have also analyzed the differences between English thought pattern and Chinese thought pattern. In the first part of this chapter, we have discussed the principles that translation should follow. In this part, we will introduce some methods of translation based on the theories and analysis provided in the previous chapters and sections.

3.2.1 Translating Chinese four-character expressions with one meaning

Due to the analysis in the third chapter, we know that the translation of the four-character expressions with a single meaning is quite different from that of the four-character expressions with a double meaning. Thus, we will discuss the translating strategies of these two kinds of expressions respectively.

3.2.1.1 Translating the expressions with the structure of juxtaposition

According to the previous analysis, expressions of this kind of structure are made up of two parts with equal status, such as “安家落户” (安家+落户), “焦躁不安” (焦躁+不安), “昏头昏脑” (昏头+昏脑), “吃苦耐劳” (吃苦+耐劳), “察言观色” (察言+观色), “价廉物美” (价廉+物美), and so on.

In terms of the relationship between the two parts in expressions of this kind, they can be further divided into three groups.

In the first group, the two parts of each expression are identical or close in meaning, such as “摇头晃脑”, “延年益寿”, “自吹自擂” and “焦躁不安”. Because of this, one can translate the meaning of either part of the expression. Being identical in meaning means repeating a certain meaning, as in “摇头晃脑” where “摇头” and “晃脑” repeat the meaning of “wag one’s head”. For example,

- (1) 摇头晃脑 wag one’s head
- (2) 延年益寿 prolong the life
- (3) 深思远虑 careful consideration
- (4) 简明扼要 concise
- (5) 焦躁不安 restless
- (6) 浓妆艳抹 heavy make-up

(7) 聪明伶俐 clever

This method of translation is also applicable to reduplicative words. When we translate them, we can only translate part of them and omit the repeated parts. For example, “规规矩矩” can be regarded as “规矩”, so translating it into “well-behaved” is quite enough. Similarly, we can extract “老实” from “老老实实” to translate it as “honest”.

In the second group, the two parts of each expression are different from each other in meaning, but with the same grammatical structure, such as “吃苦耐劳”, “悔过自新”, “劳民伤财” and “察言观色”. Take “察言观色”, for example. “察言” (examine one’s words) is a process which is different from “观色” (observe one’s countenance). In order to reproduce the whole meaning of the expression, one should translate the meanings of both parts. For example,

(8) 吃苦耐劳 to suffer bitterness and endure hardship

(9) 悔过自新 to be penitent for a fault and remold oneself

(10) 劳民伤财 waste money and manpower

(11) 察言观色 examine one’s words and observe one’s countenance

In the third group, the expressions contain the rhetorical device of antithesis, and the two parts of each expression are semantically in contrast with each other. In translation, we should not only translate the meanings of both parts of each expression, but also take into consideration the rhetorical device of antithesis in the phrases. For example,

(12) 物美价廉 fine goods at low prices

(13) 男尊女卑 men superior and women inferior

(14) 口是心非 say one thing and mean another

However, due to the complicated internal structures of this kind of expressions, sometimes, equivalence in form and content at the same time is difficult to realize. Then, we should put emphasis on meaning instead of form.

3.2.1.2 Translating the expressions with the structure of “subject + predicate”

According to the different components, expressions of this kind can be further divided into two groups.

The first group follows the mode of “noun + adjective”, such as “价格公道”, “设计独特”, “性格软弱”, “质地优良” and “举止优雅”. They are usually translated into the mode of “be + adjective + prep + noun”, a noun phrase or an adjective phrase. For example,

(15)价格公道 be moderate in price / moderate price

(16)设计独特 be unique in design / unique design

(17)性格软弱 be weak in character / weak character

(18)质地优良 be excellent in quality / high quality

(19)举止优雅 be graceful in manner / graceful

manner / be well-mannered

The second group contains the mode of “noun + verb”, such as “人才辈出”, “政企分开”, “万物复苏” and “产业升级”. They are always translated into the mode of “noun phrase + verb phrase” or “verb phrase + noun phrase”. For example,

(20)人才辈出 Talented men come out in successive batches.

(21)政企分开 separate government functions from enterprise management.

(22)万物复苏 Everything comes to life again.

(23)产业升级 to upgrade industries

From the above examples, we know that the predicates in Chinese are quite different from those in English. In Chinese, various classes of words can be used as predicates, which make the subject-predicate structure much more complicated. But in English just verbs can be used as predicates in a few different forms. So compared with the predicates in Chinese, the predicates in English are much more stable (Liu Miqing [刘宓庆], 1992:47). In Chinese, the phenomenon of using adjectives as predicates is common, such as “狭窄” (心胸狭窄), “繁多” (种类繁多), “优良” (质地优良) and “开放” (思想开放). Accordingly, we can conclude that, for the Chinese four-character expressions with single meanings and the subject-predicate pattern, the equivalent pattern in English may be “be + adjective + prep + noun”, a noun phrase, an adjective phrase, “noun phrase + verb phrase” or “verb phrase + noun phrase”.

3.2.1.3 Translating the expressions with the structure of “verb + object”

This kind of expressions is rather simple in form because all of them are composed of “verb phrase + noun phrase”. In English, we can find an identical expression in structure for nearly every one of them. However, in some situation, we can translate this pattern into the pattern of “adjective + noun”. For example, “优化结构” (verb + object, optimize the structure) can be transferred into “结构优化” (adjective+ noun, “structural optimization”) in translating. Thus, this kind of expressions can be

translated to “verb phrase + noun phrase” or “adjective + noun”. For example,

(24)促进交流 to promote the intercommunication

(25)增进友谊 to promote friendship

(26)总结经验 to sum up your experience

(27)克服缺点 to overcome shortcomings

(28)刺激内需 to stimulate domestic demand

3.2.1.4 Translating the expressions with the structure of “adjective + complement”

The mode of this kind of expressions is “adjective + complement”. The adjective is central in meaning with a following complement (modifier). For example, in “惨不忍睹”, “惨” (miserable) is the central meaning of the expression while “不忍睹” (cannot bear to see) acts as a complement; in “绰绰有余”, “绰绰” is the central meaning, while “有余” functions as a complement. So in translating such expressions, we may translate just either part, especially the component of each expression. For example,

(29)微不足道 not worth mentioning

(30)络绎不绝 in an endless stream

(31)惨不忍睹 can not bear to see

(32)绰绰有余 more than needed

(33)反复无常 unstable

In the translation of expressions of this type, the source text and the target text are not so equivalent in form because the internal structure of the original is complicated.

From the examples and analysis above we can see that for most of the four-character expressions with a single meaning, the translation and the original texts can be equivalent in grammar patterns and meanings.

3.2.1.5 Translating the expressions with the structure of “modifier + noun”

The structure of this kind of expressions is “attribute + noun”, such as “物质生活”, “小康社会”, “合资企业”, “基本国策” and “乡镇企业”. The attribute in Chinese can be an adjective or a noun. Some of these expressions can be translated into the mode of “attribute + noun” in English. For example,

(34)乡镇企业 township enterprise

(35)合资企业 joint venture

(36)物质生活 material life

(37)小康社会 a well-off society

(38)基本国策 basic state policy

In Chinese, a noun can only have an attribute or attributes before it and putting an attribute after is not allowed. For instance, we can say “小康社会”, “基本国策”, but not “社会小康”, and “国策基本”. But in English, the relationship between a noun and its attribute can be presented in two ways, namely, “attribute + noun”, such as “material life” (物质生活); or “noun + attribute”, such as “democracy at the grassroots level” (基层民主). Now I’ll introduce some examples about the translated pattern “noun + attribute”:

(39) 缉私力量 forces engaged in the fight against smuggling

(40) 涉外婚姻 Chinese marriage with foreign nationals

From the analysis we can see that, for the Chinese four-character expressions of this pattern, the equivalent pattern in English is “attribute + noun” or “noun + attribute”.

3.2.2 Translating Chinese four-character expressions with double meaning

As we all know, in Chinese, the four-character expressions with a double meaning are idioms. As we have discussed in Chapter Three, the double meaning is made up of a literal meaning and a figurative meaning. Obviously, the figurative meaning is the central meaning. Idioms are the concentrated reflection of the peculiarities of a nation or a culture and they are also the concentrated demonstration of various kinds of rhetorical devices. The translatability of idioms should be judged by whether the content of the source text is transferred. Thus, cultural factors and the translatability limitation are the two main reasons which lead to the difficulties in translating idioms. If a translation is equivalent to the original text not only in meaning, but also in language form, then the translation is a perfect one. But we cannot meet the two requirements at the same time. In many cases it is advisable to give up the language form to focus on the reproduction of the meaning. Otherwise the translator would fall into formalism (Zhang Peiji [张培基], 1964:27). So in translating them, at least the figurative meaning must be represented.

In the four-character idioms, metaphor is often used. So from this point of view, the translation of the idioms is that of metaphors to a large extent. Now let’s discuss some methods of translating idioms.

3.2.2.1 Borrowing

In some cases, we can find that there is the same or similar metaphorical image and figurative meaning between Chinese and English idioms. Then we can

directly borrow the English idiom to translate the Chinese one. For example,

(41) 浑水摸鱼 to fish in troubled waters

(42) 趁热打铁 to strike while the iron is hot

(43) 火上加油 to add fuel to the flames

(44) 隔墙有耳 walls have ears

3.2.2.2 Substitution

In some cases, we can find that some Chinese and English idioms are equivalent in both literal meaning and figurative meaning. Then we can substitute the English idiom for the Chinese one. The method is called substitution. For example,

(45) 破釜沉舟 to burn one’s boat

(46) 打草惊蛇 to wake a sleeping dog

(47) 竭泽而渔 to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs

(48) 掌上明珠 apple of one’s eye

3.2.2.3 Literal translation

Liu Zhongde (刘重德) points out, “Superficially speaking, literal translation means not to alter the original words and sentences; strictly speaking, it strives to keep the sentiments and style of the original” (1998:49). It can best preserve the cultural elements and national characteristics of the source text. If the surface form and metaphorical image of an idiom can be accepted by foreign readers, we can still translate it literally so as to keep the cultural and national color of the original language, even though we can find the equivalent English idiom in terms of figurative meaning. For example,

(49) 剖腹藏珠 to cut open your stomach to hide a pearl

(50) 对牛弹琴 to play the harp to a cow

In the above example, we translate “剖腹藏珠” into “to cut open your stomach to hide a pearl” instead of directly borrowing the semantically equivalent idiom “penny wise and pound foolish”. We translate “对牛弹琴” into “to play the harp to a cow” rather than “to cast pearls before swine”. By doing it, we can keep the color of the source text.

3.2.2.4 Free translation

The figurative image in some Chinese idioms cannot be understood by foreign readers. For example, if we translate “无孔不入” into “get into every hole”, the foreign readers must feel at loss. Then for this kind of idioms, we should take the method of free translation. In other words, we can translate just the figurative meanings by free translation on the basis of understanding the idioms. For example,

(51) 油嘴滑舌 glib-tongued

- (52)开门见山 to come straight to the point
 (53)无孔不入 to take advantage of every weakness
 (54)鞭长莫及 beyond one's reach
 (55)车水马龙 heavy traffic
 (56)绣花枕头 a person good only in looks
 (57)病入膏肓 beyond all hope

3.2.2.5 Combination of literal translation and free translation

In translation, sometimes, completely literal translation would make foreign readers confused, but completely free translation would lose the color of the source text. Then, we should combine literal translation and free translation in translating. For example,

- (58)走马观花 look at flowers while riding on the back of a galloping horse - give a cursory glance
 (59)捉襟见肘 pull down one's jacket to conceal raggedness, only to expose one's elbows - in a predicament
 (60)怨声载道 complaints are heard everywhere
 (61)怨天尤人 blame everyone and everything but oneself

In examples (60) and (61), the method of the translation of“怨声” and “尤人” is literal translation, but the translation of“载道” and “怨天” is free translation.

This translation method is simple and effective.

3.2.2.6 Literal translation with notes

There are some Chinese four-character idioms originating from ancient allusions, fables or historical stories. Only by explaining their historical background and source can the target-language readers understand the meaning of the four-character idioms completely. Then, we can adopt the method of annotation. Some of the idioms have relations with the customs and habits of a nation or a region. In the translation, we should finish the translation with the help of an intralinear note, a footnote or an endnote to make the reader or hearer have a complete knowledge of the idioms. For example,

- (62)东施效颦 Dong Shi imitating Xi Shi

Note: Xi Shi was a famous beauty in the ancient Kingdom of Yue. Dong Shi was an ugly girl who tried to imitate her ways. As a result, she looked much uglier.

By the note, the readers would have a better understanding of the original idiom. Moreover, the readers will become more interested in it. Please look at another example:

- (63)守株待兔 watching the stump and waiting for a hare/waiting for gains without pains

Note: From the story of a peasant who, seeing a hare run headlong against a tree-stump and break its neck, abandoned his plough and waited by the stump in the hope that another hare would do the same thing

If we directly translate “守株待兔” into “watching the stump and waiting for a hare”, and don't introduce the original story, the foreign readers would not understand the translation at all. So we should add the note to the translation.

From the above analyses, we can conclude that the translating methods of idioms generally include the following five ones: literal translation, substitution, borrowing, free translation, combination of literal and free translation, and literal translation with notes. When we encounter the idioms, we should carefully analyze their structures first, and then choose a suitable method to translate them.

IV. CONCLUSION

Four-character phrases play a vital role in the oral and written communications of Chinese people. They are the treasure of the Chinese language. It's necessary to do researches on their translation and let the foreigners also know the treasure. This article has introduced four-character phrases in detail and made a tentative probe into the English translation of Chinese four-character expressions from different aspects. At last, it has proposed strategies for translating them.

From the analysis we can see that, although the Chinese language is quite different from the English language, to some extent, a formal equivalence can sometimes be achieved between the ST and the TT, even in the translation of such culture-specific language forms as Chinese four-character expressions.

Nowadays, with the accession to WTO and the successful host of 2008 Olympics, China's international status is increasing rapidly. China also makes a growing influence on the whole world. More and more people have got great interest in China and paid more attention to China. They want to know more about China, especially her long history and profound traditional culture. Translation, as an important means of communication, plays an extremely important role in China's international cultural exchanges. So in order to preserve our culture's identity and expand its influence on the world in the age of globalization, we should put emphasis on translating Chinese culture into foreign language-cultures rather than vice versa. As an important unit of Chinese vocabulary and culture, Chinese four-character expressions should be introduced abroad extensively so as to better understand the Chinese language and culture.

It is certain that this study can never come to the end and further detailed research needs to be done. We just hope

that this article can offer people some help in their translation of Chinese four-character expressions. Moreover, the results of the study are still tentative, and we believe that more comprehensive achievements can be obtained.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bassnett, Susan and A. Lefevere. *Reconstructing Cultures--Essays On Literary Translation*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001
- [2] Nida, E. A. *Toward a Science of Translating*. Leiden: Brill, 1964.
- [3] *Language, Culture, and Translating*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 1993.
- [4] 陈宏薇.《汉英翻译基础》.上海:上海外语教育出版社,2002.
- [5] 刘宓庆.《汉英对比与翻译》.江西:江西教育出版社,1992.
- [6] 刘重德.《汉英语比较与翻译》.青岛:青岛出版社,1998.
- [7] 张培基.《习语汉译英研究》.北京:商务印书馆,1964.
- [8] 周荐.《汉语词汇结构论》.上海:上海辞书出版社,2004.
- [9] 庄译传.《英汉翻译教程》.北京:外语教学与研究出版社,1999.