

# A Study of the English Version of *The Last Quarter of the Moon* from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology

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**Abstract:** *The Last Quarter of the Moon* is the first novel to describe the living conditions of the Ewenki people in Northeast China. It was translated into English by the American sinologist Bruce Humes and received high praise. Based on Eco-translatology proposed by Professor Hu Gengshen, this article analyzes the adaptations and selections made by translators in the translation ecological environment by text reading and comparative analysis from “three dimensions”, that is, the linguistic dimension, cultural dimension, and communicative dimension. It is concluded that: for the translation of minority literature, in terms of language pronunciation, the translation should follow the characteristics of minority pronunciation as much as possible to retain the ethnic characteristics. The syntax translation should take into account the differences between English and Chinese and adapt to the target language habits appropriately. On the cultural dimension, the vacancy of cultural phenomena is mostly transliterated with annotation. On the communication dimension, translators should consider the stylistic characteristics, narrative style, character characteristics, and functions of the translation.

**Keywords:** *The Last Quarter of the Moon*, Eco-Translatology, “Three-Dimensional” Transformation

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## 1. Introduction

*The Last Quarter of the Moon* tells the story of the last 100 years of the Ewenki nationality in the self-narration of a 90-year-old Ewenki woman. It shows the unique way of life and national culture of this ancient nomadic hunting nationality, and the sadness of minority culture in the course of modern civilization. Living in China for more than 30 years, the American sinologist Bruce Humes has always been interested in “how different ethnic groups can cope with the irresistible trend of modernization and globalization. [1]” And Chi Zijian’s work made Bruce Humes feel that “the tragic fate of the Ewenki people in the 20th century occurred in front of me through living figures. [1]” After 8 months, he translated *The Last Quarter of the Moon*. In 2015, the English version ranked sixth in the “100-year Best Chinese-English Translation Novel” in *TimeOut Beijing Magazine*.

The success of this minority literature translation is worth studying. Guided by Eco-translatology, this article studies how translators can preserve the cultural characteristics of ethnic minorities under such a distinctive translation ecological environment. How to help foreign readers

understand original cultural customs? How to convey the style of the work, tender and soft, yet sad and heavy?

## 2. Overview of Eco-translatology

Ecological translatology is a translation study carried out ecologically. Metaphorical analogy is made between translation ecology and natural ecology, and the relationship between the translator and the translation ecological environment is analyzed.

“Ecological translatology is developed on the basis of Translation Adaptation and Selection Theory. [2]” Before translators adapt and select, they must first understand the “translation ecological environment”, which is the “world” showed by the original text, source language, and translation, an interconnection of language, communication, culture, society, and authors, readers, and clients. Due to the complexity, diversity and other characteristics of the translation ecological environment, translators must make multiple selective adaptations and adaptive selections to achieve transformation in “three dimensions”, that is, the language dimension, the cultural dimension, and the

communicative dimension. The success of this transformation can be measured by the degree of multi-dimensional transformation, reader feedback and the quality of the translator.

### 3. Translation Ecological Environment of *The Last Quarter of the Moon*

Chi Zijian grew up in the black earth of Northeast China from an early age. Her works have a strong sense of regional belonging. In *The Last Quarter of the Moon*, the natural and simple language depicts the primitive and simple natural features of the Daxinganling Mountains. She once said, "Without the nourishment of nature, without my hometown, there would be no my literature... Without a deep attachment to nature, I would have no special sympathy for the Ewenki people who are about to withdraw from the mountains, and it would not be possible to write *The Last Quarter of the Moon*." This novel is full of ecological implications: "Love and awe for nature, caring and consideration for creatures, tribute and praise to human nature, worries and anxieties about the ecological dilemmas facing human beings, and hope and imagination for the harmony of the ecological balance of the universe."

Chi Zijian is good at capturing and writing the daily life of small figures in an understanding and tender way, and supports the works with small figures. In this novel, through the description of the daily life of the Ewenki people, the changes of social history are incorporated into the changes of individuals and clans. The harmony between human and nature, and adherence to national traditions contrast with ecological destruction, and modern civilization. Chi Zijian "convincingly conveys the tenacious and persistent spirit rooted in the depths of national consciousness in a difficult living environment with deep narrative, sincere emotion and light language.[3]"

### 4. "Three-dimensional" Transformation of the English Version of *The Last Quarter of the Moon*

Eco-translatology believes that the translation process is a process in which the translator's selective adaptation and adaptive selection alternate. *The Last Quarter of the Moon* has distinctive cultural characteristics of the ethnic minority. Successful cross-cultural communication requires concise and authentic language, preserved cultural connotations, and readable communicative intentions. In the following, we will analyze the translation strategies of the English version of *The Last Quarter of the Moon* from three dimensions: language, culture and communication.

#### 4.1. Linguistic Dimension

Transformation in linguistic dimension refers to "the translator's adaptive selection of linguistic forms in the

process of translation." Specifically, the translator needs to analyze the differences between English and Chinese languages in terms of sound, form, meaning, and sentence structure in order to adapt. The method not only retains the language characteristics of the work, but also conforms to the language habits of the target language.

The highlight of the English version of *The Last Quarter of the Moon* is Bruce Humes' coping with the sound of the Ewenki language, which is mainly reflected in the names of people, mountains and rivers, and folklore items. The Ewenki language and Chinese belong to different language families. The Ewenki language belongs to the Manta-Tungus language family of the Altai language family. Therefore, it cannot be simply translated with Chinese pinyin, which may lead to the loss of the Ewenki's pronunciation characteristics. To this end, Bruce Humes worked with an Ewenki Doctor to figure out the pronunciation of these words in Ewenki, then recorded them with international phonetic transcription, and then translated them into English [4]. This transliteration "combines the pronunciation rules of Chinese, Ewenki, Russian, and Manchu [5]" well retains the language characteristics of the Ewenki.

Ewenki name	Chinese	English
	达西	Dashi
	妮浩	Nihau
	安草儿	An'tsaur
	娜杰什卡	Nadezhda
Ewenki Mountain and Water Name	Chinese	English
	阿巴河畔	the banks of the Pa Béra
	贝尔茨河	Bistaré
	阿拉齐山	Alanjak
	莫霍夫卡山	Morkofka
Ewenki folklore items	Chinese	English
	乌鲁木齐得(燧石枪)	Ulmuktu (a flintlock rifle)
	亚塔珠 (产房)	yataju (a delivery shed)
	希楞柱 (房子)	shirangju (dwelling)

Word order reflects, to a certain extent, the national customs and thinking patterns of different languages, the relationship between word symbols and the inherent meaning of language at the syntactic level. Bruce Humes reshaped and adjusted the Chinese structure of the novel, adapted to the thinking habits and language habits of English readers, more conducive to the appreciation of the novel.

(1):那是我留在岩石上的最令自己满意的岩画。

That was the most satisfying painting I ever left by a waterway.

(2):看来安草儿在取蝙蝠的时候,顺便往里面加了劈柴。

It seems An'tsaur threw some kindling on the fire when he came inside to get the dried bats.

(3):比如我们把高耸的山叫阿拉齐山,把裸露着白色石头的山叫做开拉气山,将雅格河与鲁吉刁分水岭上那片长满了马尾松的山叫做央格气。

For instance, we named one Alanjak for the way it towers from on high; one that reveals its white stones, Kailaqqi; Yanggirqi Mountain is covered with horsetail pines and lies between Yaagi River and the Luddoy Watershed.

The position of the attributive and adverbial typifies the differences in thinking pattern between English and Chinese. In Chinese, attributives are almost always prepositioned to modify the central word, while English can be prepositioned or postpositioned based on the attributive length. In (1) and (3), the translator places most of the longer attributives behind. In addition, English adverbials are usually placed at the end of a sentence, while Chinese is often preceded. So in (2), the translation follows the adverbial rule of English.

In the arrangement of paragraphs, the narrative paragraphs of *The Last Quarter of the Moon* are often very long. Bruce Humes will divide and translate the paragraphs according to the topic, well-structured and highlighting.

- (4): 额尔古纳河是那么的宽阔，冰封的它看上去像是谁开辟出来的雪场。……不过：我不喜欢娜杰什卡在胸前划十字，那姿态很像是手执一把尖刀，要剖出自己的心脏。

This is a 19-line Chinese paragraph. The first sentence of the paragraph describes the frozen scene of the Erguna River. Then vividly described the fishing scene of Hase, later, as a child, I was cheering, and Nora, another girl, playing naughtily. Nadezhda, Nora's mother, took her away for safety. Nadezhda's identity was introduced at last. Many characters and relationships are integrated in this fishing scene. Bruce Humes divided a long paragraph of Chinese into 8 small English paragraphs according to the above topics, not only highlighting the main source of food for the Ewenkis in winter, but also orderly accounting the mischievousness of the children, the worry of the mother, and the Russian identity of Nadezhda, which made a good preparation for the development of Nadezhda.

#### 4.2. Cultural Dimension

Transformation in cultural dimension means that "the translator pays attention to the transmission and interpretation of bilingual cultural connotations in the process of translation." This transformation is reflected in different cultural systems of the source language and the target language. The translator must go from the cultural connotation of the source language. Understand and adapt to its cultural system and convey the cultural connotation of the source language. National culture is a culture with national characteristics created and developed by each nation in the course of its historical development. Since the minority group of Ewenki lived in a virgin forest far from modern society for a long time, Chinese readers may have never heard of some cultural phenomena, let alone foreign readers. Therefore, how to respect the cultural history of the Ewenki people and let readers understand the distinctive culture has become a challenge in the transformation of cultural dimension. Bruce Humes used transliteration with annotation, and omission.

- (5): 拉吉达的父亲是个善良的老人，他不仅同意儿子来

我们乌力楞“入赘”，而且我们成亲的那天，他会亲自带着一行人，把拉吉达送来。

Lajide's father was a kind old man. He not only agreed that his son could ru zhui---marry into the wife's urireng---but on our wedding day he led an entourage to formally deliver Lajide to us.

- (6) 我和列那从小就跟着母亲学活计，熟皮子，熏肉干，做桦皮篓和桦皮船，缝狗皮靴子和手套，烙格列巴饼，挤驯鹿奶，做鞍桥等等。

Lena and I learned chores from Mother: how to tan a hide, smoke meat-strips to make jerky, milk reindeer, make a birch-bark basket or canoe, sew roe-deerskin moccasins and gloves, make a reindeer saddle, and how to bake khleb, our unleavened bread.

"Ru zhui" in (5) is a Chinese custom in which a male marries a female and becomes a member of the family. Without explanation, it is difficult for foreign readers to understand this cultural phenomenon, so in addition to transliterating "ru zhui", Bruce Humes also added "marry into the wife's urireng". This explanation also selects words from the context of Ewenki, "urireng" instead of "family". (6) describes the daily production of Ewenki women. In addition to translating "熏肉干" into "smoke meat-strips", Bruce Humes supplemented its finished product and uses.

- (7) 达玛拉为尼都萨满精心做了两样东西：一副狗皮“伯力”和一个“哈道苦”。伯力就是手套，我们那时一般戴的是分成两半的手套，做起来比较简单。……所以接下来他做哈道苦---烟口袋的时候，就没有绣任何花纹。

Tamara painstakingly crafted two items for Nidu the Shaman: roe-deerskin beri-gloves and a kabtuk, a tobacco pouch. Back then we wore mittens that were easy to make. ....so when she next handcrafted a kabtuk, she didn't apply any pattern.

- (8) 我对桦皮船的技艺，是跟堪达罕联系在一起的，我们习惯叫它“扎黑”。堪达罕是森林中最大的动物了，它有牛那般大，成年的堪达罕有四五百斤重呢！

My memories of birch-bark jawi are associated with the elk, the largest creature in the forest. A mature kandahang can weigh two hundred and fifty kilos!

There are two cases of omission. First, in (7), the author first told the names of the two Ewenki folk items, and then explained the meaning in the following. However, the translator worried that the reader did not know what the name of Ewenki meant, so he gave explanations right after transliterating "beri" and "kabtuk", and omitted the explanation of the original text below, and used Ewenki directly. Second, in (8), when the author described kandahang, she gave its Ewenki name "kandahang" and its common name "扎黑", and explained that it is an animal. However, in order to avoid confusion for the readers, the translator kept only "kandahang" and "the largest creature", "扎黑" omitted.

#### 4.3. Communicative Dimension

Transformation in communicative dimension refers to "the adaptive selection of bilingual communicative intentions in the translation process." Thus, the reader's understanding is

close to the author's expectations, and successful communicative dimension conversion is achieved.

- (9)伊万喝完四碗酒后,告诉我们他在营地只能呆一两天,他现在已是一个士兵了。他说那年他从东大营逃走后,在山里遇见了打鬼子的抗日联军小分队,由于形势险恶,为了保存实力,他们正准备撤到苏联境内。

"I can only stay a day or two." Said Ivan, "because I'm an enlisted soldier now. The year I escaped from the Kwantung Army Garrison, I ran into a small unit of Anti-Japanese Allied Forces who were battling the devils in the mountains. The situation was precarious, so the forces were preparing to withdraw to Soviet territory where they could preserve their strength."

- (10)依芙琳远远看见了我,就吆喝我到她那里去,说她采了一些西里毛依,让我去吃。西里毛依就是生长在河谷的黑色的稠李子果,不到深秋,它的果实是不甜的。

Yveline saw me from afar. "Come over," she yelled. "I've gathered shirimmooyi. Have a taste!" Shirimmooyi are the fruit of bird cherry plants that grow in river valleys. Before deep autumn its fruit, hackberries, aren't sweet.

*The Last Quarter of the Moon* uses "I" as a narrative perspective to participate in and witness history. The novel tells in a gentle and natural tone that reveals a touch of sadness, so the text of the novel is presented in large sections. Although there are dialogues among characters, there is no quotation mark, highlighting the "I" subject and the form of memories. However, in the English translation, Bruce Humes presented the direct quotation in a dialogue. In addition, he converted some indirect quotations into direct quotations, which enhanced the authenticity, vividness and directness of the work. Moreover, the direct quotation beautifies the structure of the translation with visual rhythm, playing a positive role in reflecting the character's personality and the development of the storyline.

## 5. Conclusion

From the comparative analysis of the original works and translations, it can be seen that the translator retains the cultural characteristics of ethnic minorities by foreignization, such as person names, place names, and ethnic folk items. Meantime, he flexibly uses annotations for explanation of cultural phenomena, and omission for avoiding readers' confusion. In addition, the translator always takes the function of the translation as a measure to make the source and target readers experience the same author's emotions as much as

possible.

Although this article analyzes the translator's adaptation and selection from the perspective of language, culture, and communication respectively, the three dimensions correlated to form the basis of transformation, especially in the translation of minority literature. Therefore, translators should fully understand the translation ecological environment, optimize translation strategies, and promote the cross-cultural communication of Chinese culture.

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