

Cultural Translation in *Green Book*

Binghui Li (Corresponding author)

School of English Language, Literature and Culture, Beijing International Studies University, China

Email: lbhcahy@163.com

Shuyan Wang

School of English Language, Literature and Culture, Beijing International Studies University, China

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Abstract

Cultural translation is a very hot topic among academic circle in China. Research on cultural translation has dramatically increased after 2006, and reached a peak in the recent five years. However, most studies are still confined to the linguistic level, starting from translation studies and focusing on the translation of culture embedded words. Thus, integrating cultural studies with translation in order to improve intercultural communication needs serious attention. After a brief summary of current cultural translation research in China, this article attempts to analyze the movie *Green Book* through five dimensions developed by Sara Maitland: interpretation, distanciation, incorporation, transformation, and emancipation. Through the translation of cultural phenomenon in the movie, this research shows that misunderstanding and conflicts are bound to happen among people from different races and classes. However, only when individuals attempt to understand each other culturally, better understanding can come up and better intercultural communication can be obtained.

Keywords: Cultural Translation, Sara Maitland, *Green Book*, Hermeneutics

1. Introduction

The movie *Green Book*, winner of Oscars for the Best Picture, the Best Original Screenplay, and the Best Supporting Actor, is a biographical comedy-drama film adopted from a true story in the mid-20th century. It is about a tour in the Deep South by classical and Jazz pianist Don Shirley who is a Black American and his driver and bodyguard Tony Lip who is Italian-American. This movie highlights identity crisis and projects the difficult situations of those minorities, involving class issues, racial issues, and gender issues in the United States. The current article attempts to analyze the movie from the perspective of cultural translation developed by Sara Maitland.

2. Flourish of Cultural Translation in China

The words culture and translation have been the most fundamental but vague concepts in humanities. When these two words are put together, cultural translation is also a controversial term, which has no absolute definition though many scholars have attempted to define it from different perspectives (Bhabha 1990, Spivak 2008, Buden & Nowotny 2009, Conway 2012, Maitland 2017). But as an interdisciplinary field, cultural translation has drawn scholars' attention, and the situation in China is no exception.

In the 1970s and 80s, the focus of most Chinese scholars in the translation field was on the translated version, the product, considering the three rules of faithfulness, smoothness and elegance. In 1990, Bassnett and Lefevere alleged the coming of “cultural turn” in the translation field in their edited essay book *Translation, History, and Culture* (1990). After that, Chinese scholars turned more attention to the cultural aspects in translation, though a bit lagging behind western scholars.

The present article examined the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the largest data base in China from January 1st, 2000 to November 1st, 2020. The results show that 2,316 articles have cultural translation in their titles, which can be shown by Figure 1:

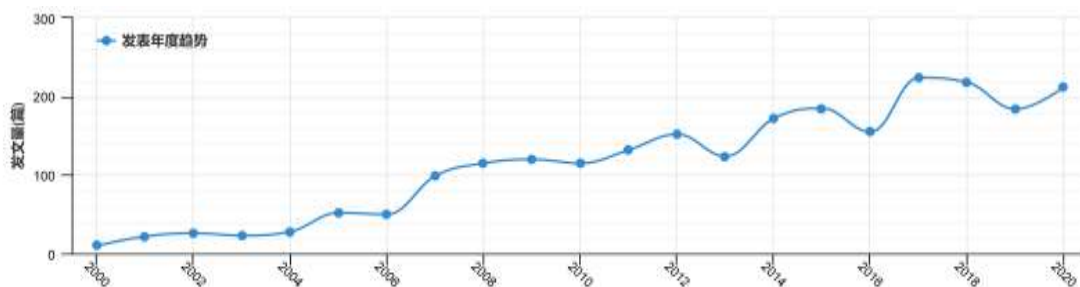


Figure 1: Annual trend of articles published with cultural translation in the titles (formulated on CNKI: <https://www.cnki.net>, retrieved on November 1st, 2020)

Based on the above graph, published articles with cultural translation in the titles started from 10 articles in 2000 to a sudden increase after 2006. The most prolific year is 2017, with 224 related articles published. In the first ten months of 2020, 212 related articles were published. It shows that cultural translation is a very hot academic topic in China.

In this book, *Cultural Translation and Classics Interpretation* (2006), Wang Ning put forward that he had always upheld the cultural translation position and insisted on looking at the influence of globalization within the cultural field from the perspective of culture, taking language as the media of cultural transmission. Translation should attempt to combine linguistic empirical research, humanities interpretation within cultural studies with case analyses of translated version. (2006, p. 6) His another book, *Cultural Turn in Translation Studies*, pushes Chinese scholars to consider cultural factors in the translation process. These two books help Chinese scholars move out of the formalist phase and begin to consider the broad issues in the process of translation. However, according to Xu Jun (2002, p. 219), translation studies in China still pays too much attention to translation strategies and language used and focuses on micro research without considering the cultural essence of translation. Among the published 2,316 articles, most are still confined to the linguistic level, starting from translation studies and focusing on the translation of culture embedded words.

3. Cultural Translation as Translation Turn in Cultural Studies

Cultural translation first appeared in Roger Keesing's article 'Conventional Metaphors and Anthropologist Metaphysics: The Problematic of Cultural Translation' in 1985. In 1990s, Susan Bassnett proposed the translation turn in cultural studies in *Constructing Cultures* (1998). After tracing the parallel development of the two fields of translation studies and cultural studies, she claimed that it is time for cultural studies and translation studies to meet and interact with each other:

Both interdisciplines have entered a new internationalist phase, and have been moving for some time away from their more overtly parochial and Eurocentric beginnings, towards a more sophisticated investigation of the relationship between the local and the global...There are now clearly several areas that would lend themselves fruitfully to greater cooperation between practitioners of both interdisciplines. (Bassnett, 1998, p. 138)

Then she proposed four areas that scholars from both disciplines can work together. Apparently, she proposed to move the field of cultural studies closer to translation studies and argued that the study of translation is actually the study of cultural interaction.

Sara Maitland in *What is Cultural Translation* (2017) attempts to combine the translating process with cultural studies, calling upon cultural translation as a solution to a range of current cultural and political problems. Occasionally supplemented from Benjamin and Steiner, the book leans heavily on Ricoeur's ontological hermeneutics, and she tends to regard cultural translation as “the purposeful orientation of the hermeneutic dimension of life towards meaningful action and the transformation of the interpreting self” (Maitland, 2017, p. 10). After the introduction on cultural translation, the book moves on to introduce the different stages of the hermeneutic process, which is divided into five chapters entitled ‘Interpretation’, ‘Distanciation’, ‘Incorporation’, ‘Transformation’, and ‘Emancipation’ respectively. For each chapter, she provides a lot of analytical examples from daily life to demonstrate practice of cultural translation. These five stages are incorporated into the whole process of reaching full understanding.

Maitland points out that fundamentally, cultural translation is considered here as the traceable presence of hermeneutic gestures of reading and writing in the construction and reception of a range of cultural phenomena. Cultural translation, therefore, is a perspective on translation that focuses on their emergence and impact as components in the ideological traffic between different cultural groups. Culture is a text and Maitland asserts that “all translation is cultural translation” (Maitland, 2017, p. 160). If so, cultural translation is about all aspects of our life indeed, and it is meaningful to use it as a tool in “how we imagine other people, the extent of their suffering and our duty to act upon it” (Maitland, 2017, p. 11).

Many cultural translation studies have been limited to the analysis of written text. As Maitland argues “no forms of communication – whether word or deed – exists outside the spatiotemporally constructed domain of human creation.” (Maitland, 2017, p. 13). All forms of communication can be interpreted and understood, because they are all human creation.

The present paper attempts to analyze the movie *Green Book* by using Maitland’s cultural translation model. The movie is adopted from a true story, which contains conflicts from different cultural groups, including black Americans of upper class, black Americans of bottom class, white Americans of upper class, and white Americans of bottom class.

4. *Green Book*

This article chooses the movie *Green Book* which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 11, 2018. It is directed by Peter Farrelly and starring Viggo Mortensen and Mahershala Ali. The movie is based on a true story that happened in the 1960s. Donald Shirley, who is a black man and one of the best classical and Jazz pianist in the world, hires a white Italian-American bodyguard Tony Lip to drive him around on a tour to the Deep South of the USA. The movie is about what happened to them, their friendship a cross races and classes, the struggle and conflicts of Donald Shirley’s cultural identity. Unlike previous movies on racial discrimination, *Green Book* illustrates a relatively heavy topic with a relaxed and warm story between a black man and a white man, a genius and a reckless man. The movie is chosen not only because of its great reputation and influence, but also because it is a perfectly suitable text for analyzing marginalized people struggling in the cracks. Additionally, it is also a condensation of American racial issue, which can be analyzed to better understand the living state of black Americans as well as the current Black Lives Matter movement.

In the movie, Don Shirley and Tony Lip are different from each other in economic, social, and cultural capital, reflecting that they come from very different social status. There is no doubt that without this trip to the south they would never get in touch with each other but as they embarked on the tour to the Deep South, they began to understand each other and gained a precious friendship in the end.

Another issue revealed in this movie is the identity confusion of Don Shirley. He is black American and homosexual, but he cannot be truly accepted by others. Homosexuality was taboo in the United States at that time. In the movie, Don Shirley roared at Tony Lip who had come after him in the rain “So if I am not black enough, and if I am not white enough, and if I am even not man enough, then tell me Tony, what am I?” The pressure of reality crushed his dignity, and made his heart and soul exhausted. Actually, since the end of the American Civil War, identity confusion has been plaguing black Americans. On the surface, Don Shirley is glorious, knowledgeable, talented, rich in economy, but always unable to escape the identity of black people in the white people’s eyes. He is marginalized even though the white upper class appreciated his artistic attainments. However, no matter how successful and wealthy Don Shirley is, he is still a second-class citizen, even worse than the white underclass, his hired driver Tony. Every idealist who sees darkness spreading in his own era should take courageous steps towards reality in the hope that the time will come when the ice and snow will melt. Additionally, Dr. Shirley set an example for colored people and immigrants who are in a disadvantaged position but want to strive for their equal rights. Shirley used his musical talent to win people’s applause, and used his sincerity to win a sincere friendship with Tony, and finally used his silent resistance to won back his dignity in the face of those white people of upper class.

5. Cultural Translation in *Green Book*

5.1. Interpretation

In the movie, two men of different classes and different races had to get on with each other, so they started to understand each other from “reading” their clothing, their utterance as well as their actions. According to Maitland, “In philosophical hermeneutics, the objects of interpretation are the mysteries of human discourse — whether inscribed in text or in human action — as the means by which human beings express themselves” (Maitland, 2017, p. 65). All human actions or texts can be the objects of translation, because that is the way they express themselves. Through the interpretation of these mysteries, one can gain a better understanding on others as well as themselves.

Tony, who is a responsible and hard-working husband and father, has no significant moral defects and did not accept colored races at all at first. He even threw away the cups once used by black Americans as it is the ingrained stereotype that caused his racial discrimination. According to Ricouer, “Interpretation, we will say, is the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning” (Ricouer, 2004, p.14). While doing interpretation, one can reveal the hidden meaning from its surface. Tony did some interpretation on Don Shirley. When Tony searched for Dr. Don Shirley’s apartment in the Seventh Avenue, he surprisingly found that he lived above Carnegie Hall. Dr. Shirley’s address is the first impression that he left on Tony, and the address showed his upper economic status. Maitland (2017) remarks that symbol has its inherent plurivocity, which ensures that the

symbol cannot survive outside of its unique positional context. When he saw Don sitting in the magnificent chair in his luxurious apartment, he described him as a tribal chief sitting in the throne. In the eyes of Tony, Carnegie Hall and Shirley's chair are both symbols of Shirley's arrogance and pompousness.

The misunderstanding and alienation is from two groups of people. One is from white Americans, and the other is from black Americans. As Culler (1997) argues that the self is constituted by what is reflected back, generally by others in social relations. Even though Dr. Shirley enjoys wonderful wealth and fame, he feels quite lonely. When Don Shirley performs on the stage as the most successful pianist, those white Americans of upper class are the audience of Don Shirley. They flock together to listen to Don's concerts and applause for him. But when Don Shirley steps off the stage, they just treat him as other ordinary black Americans who are inferior to them.

In addition to not being able to integrate into the white society, Don Shirley is unable to integrate with black Americans as well. At that time, most black Americans in the United States only served as waiters, engaged in manual labor and other jobs. The number of black people who had entered the upper class in economy like Don Shirley were quite few. In the movie, when Don lived in the hotel for black Americans, some of them invited him to take part in their games. Although Don refused them in a quite polite way, they became annoyed and mocked on his suit by assuming it as butler's suit. Maitland (2017) points out that symbols which give rise to thought have their multiplicity of meaning. In the eyes of people in that age, a suit on black people is not only a suit, it also suggests the identity of a butler. Because in that age, most black people would not have money to buy such expensive suit, and many white people of upper class hired black people as their butlers who are supposed to wear decent suit.

5.2. *Distanciation*

In order to settle his distress of identification as well as tear down the walls of bigotry and stereotype for black American, Dr. Shirley stepped out of his comfort zone in New York and embarked on a concert tour in the Deep South, trying to get in touch with people who have prejudice on him despite the distance and otherness between them. This is also a movie about courage and change. When Tony asked why Dr. Shirley decided to tour in the Deep South and shake hands with people who do not treat him sincerely with a smile, Shirley's friends answered that "Being genius is not enough, it takes courage to change people's hearts." In addition, it also takes him huge courage to face the disdainful eyes of the driver Tony, the puzzled eye of his black compatriots working in the fields, and the discriminatory eyes of the white prison guards in the Sunset City. In the movie, the scene that Dr. Shirley just compressed his lips in silence is more powerful than any other words. It was this courage that helped him overcome loneliness and exceed himself.

According to Maitland, "Translation itself is the means by which the distance is closed and the breach in the space-time continuum that separates the translator from the relics of the past is filled (Maitland, 2017, p. 97)." Thus, translation can overcome the distance, fill the breach, and to achieve better understanding. The gap between his driver Tony Lip and Shirley is the first breach to fill. Dietary preference and eating custom, which indicates the difference in class and taste could cause a breach in their relationship. On the way to the first stop, when they passed Kentucky, Tony bought some Kentucky fried chicken and ate them with his hands, and he forced Dr. Shirley to use his hands to eat them together. But Dr. Shirley refused to eat the greasy food with hands at first, as the occupation of pianist internalizes Shirley's sense of order. Therefore, he would rather value the etiquette of eating and the sense of ritual. But he finally swallowed his pride and enjoyed the Kentucky fried chicken with Tony. Also, when he asked how to deal with the chicken bones, Tony just threw it away through window. Dr. Shirley smiled happily, which was his first smile in the movie. As Tony told him: "My father used to say, whatever you do, do it 100 percent, work like you work, laugh like you laugh, and eat like it's your last meal", Dr. Shirley started to obtain more knowledge about him. He learned that Tony attaches great importance to family, so he is a man full of warm emotion indeed.

Tony also made much effort to overcome the discrepancies with Dr. Shirley. At first such effort is made to complete his job smoothly and get his salary, but at last he did it out of his willingness. When Dr. Shirley fell into trouble, he would stand for him and managed to save him out of trouble. His courage is not reflected in his competition to eat hamburgers and win, nor in his having to serve black people in order to support his family, but in his being touched by Dr. Shirley's noble behavior, changing his prejudice. When Tony said, "I have been working night clubs in the New York city my whole life... I know it is complicated world", he started to change his preconception on colored people and get in contact with Shirley in person. Therefore, the stereotype started to disintegrate, and new understanding came up, especially for Dr. Shirley who had such fascinating personality charm. He appreciated Dr. Shirley's outstanding performance and acknowledged his excellence in knowledge and behavior.

Before the last performance, Dr. Shirley told Tony about his experience, growing up in the white world and nurturing art. However, art gave him dignity, but he could not break through the limitation of racial identity. His record company persuaded him to play pop music because they felt that the audience would not be glad to see a black man who plays classical music on the stage. Concept that classical music belongs to white people is non-natural but socially constructive, showing the class inequality in social and economic distribution. In front of Steinway's piano, Shirley was sitting with notes flowing from his fingertips, giving him a noble glow for a moment. But Shirley knew his real situation: "Rich white people pay me to play the piano, because it makes them feel very cultured. But when I stepped off the stage, in their eyes, I immediately became a black man." Tony Lip sympathized him and supported him sincerely, and when they rest in the same room, Tony said: "The world is full of lonely people waiting to make the first move." They had considered each other as their genuine friend tacitly. It is only when people cross the distance and place themselves in each other's position achieving better understanding.

5.3. Incorporation

From the experience of this tour, Dr. Shirley and Tony not only changed their opinions about each other and gained a valuable friendship, but also learned a lot from each other. Dr. Shirley had been trying to correct Tony's ill-educated behavior, instill his values in him, such as persuading him to return the stone that he picked up and to pick up the litter he had thrown away. He persuaded Tony to polish his diction and shorten his Italian last name in order to be easily pronounced.

When Tony wrote letters to his wife, Dr. Shirley recognized his poor writing style, so he helped him write letters more infectiously and romantically, which can enhance the marital affection between Tony and his wife. Tony finally learned his way of writing, and could write intriguing letters. As Maitland (2017) suggests that translation acknowledges what is different and inscribes it within its own creation, it is ultimately a journey home-bound. Tony definitely acknowledged that Dr. Shirley has far more talent in writing, and he could not write the same letter as him. But he appropriated his way of writing in his own simple words and created the similar enchanting atmosphere in his letter. While one of his relatives called him "Shakespeare" amusingly, his wife had already known that it was Dr. Shirley who helped Tony write letters. And when Shirley thanked Tony's wife for sharing Tony with him, she hugged him warmly whispering "Thank you for helping Tony write letters".

In fact, Dr. Shirley also learned a lot from Tony, who is always brave to defend his own rights and interests. As well-educated as Shirley, he knew how to maintain elegance, but he had not found a way out to resist unfair treatment before he met Tony. Under the guidance and restriction of the *Green Book*, he could only stay in some hotels and restaurants provided for black people. When he was mocked by other black people, he felt embarrassed and left in a hurry. He went to the bar to get drunk, but was beaten by white people. When he was caught by the police and charged with taking a bath with a white man, he was ashamed and did not resist at all. Under Tony's influence, he finally started to resist the unfair situations. Dr. Shirley certainly would not resort to violence as Tony used to, but he appropriated Tony's rebellious spirit, and defended himself in a more rational and intelligent way.

On the American highway, which symbolizes freedom and equality, Tony and Shirley experienced a pilgrimage of the soul. As Feinberg argues, *Green Book* is not a simple "white savior movie" (Feinberg, 2019, p. 42) because they saved each other, and more importantly, Shirley saved Tony's soul. Tony changed his mind and behavior. He was no longer rude. Shirley was also infected by Tony. He finally dared to resist and to express himself. They were mutually involved, helping each other, changing together, and accomplishing each other.

5.4. Transformation

Shirley did not have to do a tour of the racist South, but he did, reportedly believing that he could change some minds with his performances. According to Benjamin, "A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 79). Benjamin provides the standard of good translation. Dr. Don Shirley did not say anything to defend him and his compatriot, but he impressed everyone with his outstanding musical talent, demonstrating black Americans' ability and dignity, which are not less than or inferior to white people. Shirley always firmly believes that in the face of conflicts, violent confrontation is not the only way to solve the problem. Maintaining personal self-cultivation and dignity, deepening communication, so that the other side can understand you, and truly respect you from heart. As Shirley told Tony in the jail: "You will never win with violence. Tony, you only win when you maintain your dignity. Dignity always prevails." And when he did so, he totally changed Tony's original view on him.

In addition, at the beginning of the movie, Tony, who worked in a night club was accustomed to the exchange of interests and believed that everything could be solved with money. During his journey, he also used bribery to solve problems. But at the last stop of the tour, when the white manager tried to bribe Tony to let him take Dr. Shirley to dinner elsewhere, he refused to be bought for the sake of Dr. Shirley and his dignity. When Shirley told Tony "I will perform if you want me to", Tony took him out of the restaurant, even he could not stand the discriminant practice of racial segregation any longer. By then, Tony had treasured their friendship more than his salary, and his perception of black American had been totally transformed.

5.5. Emancipation

After performed in the bar with black Americans, Dr. Shirley felt quite joyful and relaxed, and said he would come here once a month. He finally found a way to get along with other black Americans. In order to send Tony back to home in time, Dr. Shirley drove in the snow. By then, he had totally changed his lofty stance to make friendship with other black Americans as well as white people at the bottom.

Meanwhile, Tony, who witnessed Shirley being treated unfairly because of racial discrimination, also changed his attitude towards colored people, and took a brave step towards eliminating racial discrimination. On Christmas Eve, when Tony's relatives called Shirley "Negro", Tony shouted back angrily: "Don't call him that." And then Dr. Shirley finally showed up at Tony's home with a bottle of red wine, in the face of the family's dismay, Tony sincerely introduced Shirley to his large family with a history of racial discrimination. According to Maitland, "To understand a text, we must believe that it is more than the sum of its parts, while diverting ourselves simultaneously of our presumption of understanding" (Maitland, 2017, p. 155). Thus, in doing cultural translation, one should understand all parts of a text, because it is more than the sum of parts. In *Green Book*, both Dr. Don Shirley and his driver Tony are more than a series of symbols; their identity is not defined by stereotypes imposed by others. In the movie, Shirley had a very different lifestyle from that of the black people in the eyes of the white people. Traditionally, black people are considered to be vulgar, bad tempered addict. But Dr. Shirley likes to savor

wine, read books and listen to music before going to bed. Therefore, they need to understand each other constantly, because every time they understand each other in a different place and different time, the result will be different too. According to Maitland:

Cultural translation presumes in turn to pose something different and better; a different way of viewing things; a contrapuntal construction of events; a different characterization of the lead characters; a different presumption of authority with which to represent the view of others. (Maitland, 2017, p. 177)

Good cultural translation gives its reader a different perspective and definitely better understanding about other cultures. At the end of the movie, Don Shirley and Tony Lip had a different and better understanding of each other and gained a life-long friendship. These two men broadened the dimension of each other's life as they stepped out of their comfort zone and met and understood each other as well as themselves better.

6. Conclusion

Green Book brings the audience's attention to the dark age of racial segregation and reflects race issues that are still hidden in society. This paper analyzes this movie from the perspective of cultural translation, and shows that during the process of interaction and communication between the two men of different races and different classes, misunderstanding and conflicts are bound to happen. However, when they ignore stereotypes and start to understand each other by placing themselves in each other's shoes, they have better understanding and genuine friendship.

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