CULTURE AND IDIOM TRANSLATION

When translating idioms, it is important to take cultural into consideration. For the same idiom, we can find several expressions similar or dissimilar, which may cause misunderstanding of the idiom.

Different cultural sources, religious beliefs and values bring about barrier to idiom translation. So we should adopt proper methods to translate idioms. There are five major approaches: literal translation, equivalent translation, transferred translation, additional translation and liberal translation.

First of all, we have to know the most important rule as a premise, there is neither absolutely literal translation nor completely liberal translation. We can see these examples:

E.g. 完璧归赵 To return the jade intact to the State of Zhao. (literal)
To return a thing intact to its owner. (liberal)
To return something to its owner in good condition. (liberal)

瓜熟蒂落 A melon falls when it is ripe. (literal)
Everything comes right when the right time comes. (liberal)

From the examples, we can see either literal translation or liberal translation has its limitations. Which approach we should resort to depends on the interrelation between the source language and the target.
language. Nevertheless, some idioms can only be translated by liberal
translation instead of literal translation. Just as “there is a will, there is a
way” (有志者,事竟成) and “be there or be square” (観欄)  

1. Literal translation

Literal translation means not to alter the original words and sentences,
not to change the sentiments and style of the original. In other words, it
is to keep the original meanings and style, to reproduce both the
ideological content and the style of the original works and retains as
much as possible the figures of speech. So the method of literal
translation is always used in idiom translation when cultures are similar:

E.g. Strike while the iron is hot (趁熱打鐵), Many hands make light work (人多好
事), Out of sight, out of mind (眼不见,心不烦)

2. Equivalent translation

Some idioms have similar metaphorical meanings with the same or
similar metaphorical images; the target language of this kind of idioms
has the same or similar images. That is to use the same cultural schema
to translate the source language in similar rhetoric and images. For
example,

E.g. Where there is smoke, there is fire (無風不起浪), Give a person a dose of
his own medicine (以牙還牙)

3. Transferred translation

English and Chinese idioms express the same cultural connotation by
different concepts. This method is called transferred translation, which is
to use different but a little bit similar cultural schema to translate the
source language in different figures of speech and different images. For example,

E.g. At one’s wit’s end (智穷才尽), Out of order (杂乱无章), Birds of a feather flock together. (物以类聚)

4. Additional translation

When translating idioms, we sometimes should add something to meet the original meaning. Usually, we add notes or interpretative words in idiom translation. That is to use totally different cultural schema to translate the source language. For example,

To see red. 怒不可遏 (notes: in Spain, when waging bull fighting, people will take a red rag to wave come and back, to irritate the bull, as a result, the bull will distract his attention to the red rag. So people use this idiom to describe someone is very angry. And “a red rag to a bull” is compared to someone’s angry or irritation.)

Three cobblers with their wits combined equal Zhuge Liang the mastermind. 三个臭皮匠,当个诸葛亮。 (notes: the translation of this idiom has added the interpretative words “with their wits combined” and “the master mind”.)

5. Liberal translation

Liberal translation is an alternative method that is used mainly to convey the meaning and spirit of the original without trying to reproduce its sentence patterns or figures of speech. In many cases, the source language and target language express the same meaning in different ways. The method of liberal translation is often used when it is really impossible for a translator to do literal translation, when there are
different cultural schemas between the source and target language. For example:

E.g. Like a fish out of water (像一条鱼), Break the ice. (打破沉默), To spill the beans (泄密)

Every nation has its own culture, which is similar or dissimilar to others’ Translation can be more appropriately perceived with the profounder understanding of culture. For truly successful translation, biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism.

If a translator tries his best to store enough cultural knowledge in his mind and stimulates cultural schemas when doing translation, the interpretation will become more effective and accurate.

Idioms are an important part of language and reflect culture. There are many differences in idioms in different nations, which lie on cultural sources and background, including geography, religions, customs and history.

To be a successful translator, we should accumulate as much cultural knowledge as possible, mastering some skills and paying enough attention to cultural schemas. Literal translation, equivalent translation, transferred translation; additional translation and liberal translation are main methods to do it.