

On Translation Strategies of Chinese Culture-Loaded Words

XIANG Chunyan^{[a],*}

^[a]English Department, Binzhou University, Binzhou, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Chinese culture-loaded words refer to the words, phrases, or idioms symbolizing unique features of Chinese culture. There are many Chinese culture-loaded words in the process of reading or translating Chinese literary works, intercultural communication. It's accurate translation of Chinese culture-loaded words is conducive to the development of linguistic, and it is of vital importance for translation and intercultural communication. This article systematically introduces five kinds of Chinese culture-loaded words, thus summarizing foreignization and domestication translation strategy based on relevance translation theory, equivalence translation theory. Through analysis of examples, it lists different translation methods, aiming at choosing the best solution to translate different Chinese culture-loaded words. It not only enables readers to gain better understanding of Chinese literary and make intercultural communication, but also makes great contribution to diffuse Chinese culture around the world.

Key words: Culture-loaded word; Foreignization; Domestication

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, Chinese culture is spread widely. More and more foreigners, therefore, have great interest in China, especially in the brilliant Chinese culture. For the best manifestation of Chinese cultural peculiarities, Chinese culture-loaded words demand accurate and idiomatic translation in order to achieve successful cultural communication between China and the West.

Many scholars have made great contributions to the translation of culture-loaded words. For one thing, some foreign translators have researched the translation of Chinese culture-loaded words. Nida (1993) expressed his theory "functional equivalence" which emphasizes the translator's responsibility is to make the target readers understand the source-cultural information in the target text. It is similar to the domestication strategy. But Nida's "Functional equivalence" only has relation with domestication strategy regardless of foreignization strategy. At the same time, Lawrence Venuti (1995) emphasizes on the translator's bringing out of the uniqueness and differences of the source culture from the target culture. It is similar to the Foreignization strategy. While the theory that Lawrence Venuti puts forward only has relation with foreignization strategy regardless of domestication strategy. For another, some Chinese translators have also researched the translation of culture-loaded words. Culture-loaded words include culture-loaded color words, culture-loaded plant words, political culture-loaded words, euphemisms, and words with implications, etc. (Sun, 2003). While the definition of culture-loaded words lacks generality. The above problems will be solved in the paper.

The paper will introduce the proper translation strategies based on many important translation theories for different Chinese culture-loaded words, thus expressing the meanings of Chinese culture-loaded words and Chinese culture better. On the basis of that, it will be easier for foreigners to understand Chinese

culture for avoiding misunderstanding. Moreover, Chinese cultural-loaded will absolutely enrich the language.

1. CULTURE-LOADED WORDS

1.1 Definition of Chinese Culture-Loaded Words

“As the most active element of a language, lexemes often most sensitively reflect the changes and developments in social life and thoughts” (Wu, 2001). Culture-loaded words abound in literary language with its cultural characteristics, which embody the beliefs, values and stereotypes shared by language and culture community. In this sense, it is important for the systematic exploration of translation of Chinese culture-loaded words by literary works in facilitating the exchange eastern and western cultures. Because this paper pays attention to the translation of Chinese culture-loaded words, the first step for us to do in this chapter is to clarify the definition of these words.

The definition of culture-loaded words is diversified. Generally speaking, culture-loaded words are considered as the words unique to a certain culture, which has hardly any corresponding equivalents in any other languages and is full of rich cultural connotations and. Up to now, some scholars have expressed their views on defining culture-loaded words. As J. F. Aixela, a famous Spanish translator names these words culture-specific items and gives a definition of it in the book *Culture-Specific Items in Translation* (1996):

Some items appearing in the source text do not have equivalent items in the target reader’s cultural system or these items have different textual status with those in the target reader’s cultural system, thus leading to a translation difficulty while transferring the function and meaning of the source text to the target text.

According to Aixela, different textual status has a relation to different value caused by diversified ideology and habit.

Baker (2000) puts forward a clear definition: “The source-language word may express a concept which is totally unknown in the target culture. The concept in question may be abstract or concrete; it may relate to a religious belief, a social custom, or a type of food. Such concepts are often referred to as culture-specific”. Nord uses the term “cultureme” to replace culture-loaded words.

At the same time, Chinese translation experts have also explained their definitions of these words respectively. Hu (1999) also puts forward a clear definition, “Culture-loaded words is loaded with particular cultural information of a certain nation and represent deep national culture. They are the direct or indirect reflection of national culture at the structure of words”. While Sun (2003) describes culture-loaded words as following: There are

many words in both English and Chinese which have rich cultural connotations, especially slang, dialects, adapts and idioms. They are considered as culture-specific terms or culture-loaded words.

In conclusion, though there are many versions of definition about culture-loaded words, they have the similarity that culture-loaded words are full of cultural connotations. Chinese culture-loaded words in this paper refer to words and expressions which are unique in Chinese culture, and hardly can find their equivalents in any other languages, such as English. Take the Chinese word “饺子” for example. In China, it is a kind of traditional food which is made in important festivals, such as the Spring Festival. But in English, we can’t find such a word in English and convey the meaning of it.

1.2 Classification of Chinese Culture-Loaded Words

1.2.1 Ecological Chinese Culture-Loaded Words

In *Oxford Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary* (New Edition) (2001), “ecology” is explained as “the pattern of relations of plants, animals and people to each other and to their surroundings”. Therefore, ecological culture-loaded words are reflections of geographical characteristics of a language community and the climate features of the natural environment. China is a continental ancient country with a vast size, where a variety of ecological culture-loaded words appears and becomes more and more important elements in Chinese language and traditional culture. For example, “泰山北斗” (Mount Tai and the North Star) and “有眼不识泰山” (Although one has eyes he cannot but fails to discern the sacred Mount Tai).

1.2.2 Material Chinese Culture-Loaded Words

Material culture-loaded words have a close relation to the material things created by Chinese people, such as products, articles, tools, etc., which can directly represent the material culture caused by the people in a given cultural community. Take “四合院” for example. “四合院” refers to a walled compound of traditional Chinese house of grey bricks and tiles built around a courtyard. It brings difficulties in the translation as there are no counterparts in English and then it is quite unfamiliar to the English readers. Some measurement words (亩、里), clothe words (旗袍、中山装), house words (四合院、堂屋) and food words (月饼、龙井茶), music instrument words (箫、琵琶) etc..

1.2.3 Social Chinese Culture-Loaded Words

Social culture-loaded words refer to the reflections of behavior pattern, customs and social life in a given language community. Through long historical development, different societies have had different ways of life, traditional customs, conception of beauty and value systems, etc. As for the Chinese culture-loaded words “压岁钱”, China Daily translated it in January 1st as to present children with newly printed cash as Yasuiqian, or

gift money, is one ritual of Chinese in celebrating lunar New Year. This kind of translation is accurate as well as very proper. It not only expresses the original meaning accurately, but also keeps the unique Chinese culture. Another example is the color word “红”, in Chinese, “开门红” means “to begin well”, while in English, “to see red” means “火冒三丈”.

1.2.4 Religious Chinese Culture-Loaded Words

Religion is an important cultural factor. Religious tradition is the origin of Culture-loaded words of this type. China is a country of many religious beliefs, and generally speaking, there are three major religions—Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. These three religions have enriched Chinese culture and have a great influence on Chinese people. For example, in Chinese “天花乱坠”, “借花献佛” (borrow a bouquet of flowers or anything else to make a gift of it) “回头是岸”, “放下屠刀, 立地成佛”, “君子成人之美” are widely used. In English-speaking countries, Christian is the popular religion, so there are lots of words concerning it, for example, “as poor as church mouse”, “God help those who help themselves”, etc..

1.2.5 Linguistic Chinese Culture-Loaded Words

Linguistic culture-loaded words refer to the expressions of the characteristics of the phonemic, formal and grammatical systems in a given language community. English belongs to Indo-European family while Chinese belongs to Sino-Tibetan family. They differ in lexicon, sound, syntax and grammar. Compared with the Chinese language, English is more logical, abstract, streamlined, symbolical and rational, while the Chinese language is more comprehensive, intuitive, pictographic, esthetic and ethical. To some extent, those diversified linguistic peculiarities create barriers in the translation practice. For example, idioms like “爱屋及乌”, puns like “哑巴吃黄连” make it hard to understood by translators. And there are a lot of dialects, such as “唠嗑” (lao ke, which means “to engage in small talk”), “干仗” (gan zhang, which means “to fight with sb.”).

From the above discussions, generally speaking, Chinese culture loaded words have three main characteristics. Firstly, they are peculiar or unique in Chinese culture. Many culture-loaded words are peculiar or unique in one culture. Secondly, they are rich in cultural connotations or associative meanings. Some culture loaded words or expressions are embedded with rich cultural connotations. Since some words and expressions carry rich connotations, literal translation will cause cultural losses. Moreover, some other culture loaded words or expressions are rich in associative reflection. Thirdly, they are difficult or impossible to find equivalents in other cultures.

Culture loaded words are closely related to the cultural background of those speaking that language, and express the concepts of those things caused by the unique culture, so it is difficult or impossible to find the complete equivalents.

2. TRANSLATION THEORIES ON CHINESE CULTURE-LOADED WORDS

2.1 Relevance Theory

Based on Grice’s Principle of Relevance, Sperber and Wilson propose the Relevance Theory: Communication and Cognition, which are thought as one of the important theories in the cognitive pragmatics. Gutt applies the Relevance Theory to translation, and puts forward the Relevance Translation Theory in *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*, which have greatly influenced on translation and has a unified theoretic framework for the studies on translation. In relevance translation theory, Gutt (2004) puts forward that “translation is an act of communication between translator and target audience”.

According to the Relevance Translation Theory, the process of translating culture-loaded words can be explained in the following diagram:

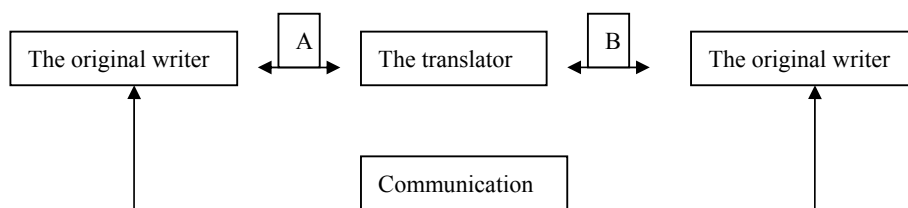


Figure 1
The Process of Translating Culture-Loaded Words

As can be seen from the above diagram, the translation of culture-loaded words consists of two processes of ostensive-inferential communication, that is, process A and process B. In process A, the translator should reach the cognitive consensus with the original writer, realize the cultural connotation included in the culture-loaded words and the informative purpose of the original writer

and then infer the communicative purpose. In process B, the translator should take the cognitive environment of the original writer and that of the target reader into account, so as to ensure whether their cognitive environments are compatible or not. From the above analysis, it can be easily seen that in the process of translating culture-loaded words, the translator plays a dual role who acts as

both the acceptor and the sender of information. In other words, through the translator, the indirect communication between the target reader and the original writer of the culture-loaded words can be achieved.

2.2 Equivalence Translation Theory

Equivalence is central issue in translation. Its definition within the field of translation has caused heat debate. Many famous experts have equivalence and have put forward their own opinions, such as Jacobson, Nida, Catford, Wilss, Newmark, Bassnett and so on.

Eugene A. Nida makes a difference between formal and dynamic equivalence in translation, formal equivalence is to a proper reproduction of source-text form elements and dynamic equivalence meaning equivalence of extralinguistic communicative effect. Complete naturalness of expression aims at a translation of dynamic equivalence, which does not insist that he understands the cultural patterns of the source-language context (Nord, 2001).

The most significant contribution Peter Newmark makes is to make the distinction between communicative translation and semantic translation in the theory of translation. According to Newmark, communicative translation tries to have an influence on its readers as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original. Semantic translation tries to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original (Newmark, 2001).

3. TRANSLATION STRATEGIES OF CHINESE CULTURE-LOADED WORDS

In this chapter, theory is put into practice, i.e. translations of five kinds of Chinese culture-loaded words are discussed in light of the above theories. Numerous factors influence the translator's choice-making in translating Chinese culture-loaded words, but this chapter merely pays more attention to the influence of culture on the translating culture-loaded words.

3.1 Foreignization Strategy

Venuti is the representative of foreignization translation. He says that his aim of proposing foreignization method is to "develop a theory and practice of translation that resists dominant target-language cultural values so as to signify the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text" (Venuti, 2004). Foreignization translation pays attention to retaining the cultural flavors of the source language and makes the reader have an alien reading experience, thus developing the reader's awareness of cultural differences.

Foreignization strategy can achieve a relatively high degree of intelligibility through faithfully transferring the cultural features of the source text into the target text. Therefore, Foreignization translation should take the first

place in translation strategies. Basically, Foreignization can be realized by four practical translation methods: Transliteration, literal translation, transliteration plus a note, literal translation plus a note.

3.1.1 Transliteration

Transliteration is a kind of translation method, which keeps the major function of designative meaning in the translated versions and the pronunciation of the source language cultural item and. It is often used in translating some proper names, especially names of person, place or geographical features, brand names; or objects, things and phenomenon peculiar to the source language culture which has no correspondences in English.

In *The Relevance Translation Theory*, Gutt (2004) claims that "phonetic properties can be an important clue in translation when it comes to the rendering of proper names". Therefore, according to *The Relevance Translation Theory*, transliteration can be used to translate those culture-loaded words of proper names. Many examples of material culture-loaded words are translated in this way, such as 粽子 (zongzi), 功夫 (kungfu), 荔枝 (litchi), 馄饨 (wonton), and so on. Actually, this method is frequently used to introduce new material entities into the target culture, so more and more westerners show great interests in it.

3.1.2 Transliteration Plus a Note

Though transliteration can keep the original form of the source language, it can not make the target reader comprehend the cultural connotations or images in the source culture. Therefore, a note added to the transliterated word can provide lots of important information to get the translated text better accepted by the target reader. The example of ecological culture-loaded words for this method as follows:

“食在滨州”— (*Binzhou Daily*, 2000)

“West or east, Binzhou's food is best”— (*Binzhou Daily*, 2000)

Endnote: Modern Binzhou, in Shandong Province.

The note added to the target text can make the target reader associate the former names with their current names to get a better understanding of the original meaning. The translation can provide enough cultural information for the target reader and be faithful to the source culture by taking this method.

3.1.3 Literal Translation

Literal translation is explained as "not to alter the original words and sentences"; strictly speaking, and it strives "to keep the sentiments and style of the original" (Sun, 2003).

In the Equivalence Translation Theory, "in the case of minor literature that is closely bound to its period and its culture, semantic translation will attempt to preserve its local flavor" (Newmark, 2001), to some extent, he so-called "semantic translation" by Newmark is similar to literal translation. Therefore, according to the Equivalence Translation Theory, how this method is applied to

translate social culture-loaded words can be explained by the following example.

“鸿渐给酒摆布得失掉自制力道：反正你会摆‘空城计。’”——《围城》（钱钟书，1991）

“Under the influence of alcohol, Hung-chien has lost his self-control, as he blurted out; anyway, you could always pull the ‘empty-town bluff’” (Wang, 2004).

There is no doubt that literal translation can keep the cultural flavor of the source culture and it is easy for the target reader to understand from the surface.

3.1.4 Literal Translation Plus a Note

If the source text is difficult for the target reader to understand, a note is necessary to be added in the English version to make it easier for the target reader to understand.

“不料这秃儿却拿着一支黄漆的棍子——就是阿Q所谓哭丧棒——大踏步走了过来。”——《阿Q正传》（Lu, 1995）

“To Ah Q’s surprise, “Baldy” start moving directly toward him, a yellow-lacquered cane-what Ah Q called a wailing stick in his hand” (Xu, 2007).

Note: The “wailing stick” (kusang bang) had been traditionally carried by filial sons in funeral processions.

The religious culture-loaded words “哭丧棒” here is a word with a profound Chinese funeral culture which is carried by a son to his parents funeral to show filial piety, so the culture meaning of this word should be explained in detail for readers.

3.2 Domestication Strategy

E. A. Nida is one of the representatives of the domesticating translation who says,

Some people have thought that each language is so distinct that there is no valid way in which the discourse of one language can be translated into another. But at least ninety percent of the fundamental structures of all languages are quite similar, and language universals outweigh the divergences. (Nida, 2001)

Domestication translation minimizes the foreignness of the source-language text by changing heterogeneous elements into what is familiar to the target-language reader. The application of domestication usually can be divided into two translation methods: free translation, substitution.

3.2.1 Free Translation

Free translation is an important translation method it remains the content of the source language without the form of the original. In many conditions target language and source language express the same meaning in different expression forms, thus it’s hard to translate it into the target language with the same effect in its original language. The translation should be intelligible.

In the Equivalence Translation Theory, “communication of meaning across cultures always required free translations in the form of the message if the content is to be accurately and faithfully transmitted” (Nida, 1993). Unintelligibility is not real faithfulness

to the original. Therefore, according to Equivalence Translation Theory, how this method is applied to translate ecological and material culture-loaded words can be explained with the following examples.

(a) “十冬腊月没盖的, 冻得整宿直哆嗦。”——《暴风骤雨》(Zhou, 1954)

“In winter he had no bedding and woke up several times during the night shivering”. (Xu, 1955, p.34)

The ecological culture-loaded expression “十冬腊月” is the cold season in China, which consists of the lunar month of October, November and December. Here the original writer uses this cultural-loaded item to emphasize that “the weather is very cold”.

(b) FSLJ: “母金氏, 弟克昌, 家徒壁立。”——《浮生六记》(Lin, 1999)

“In the family there were only her mother (of the Chin clan) and her younger brother K’ehch’ang and herself, being then practically destitute.” (Lin, 1999)

The material culture-loaded words “家徒壁立” is usually employed to describe the state of being completely destitute. However, the same expression can not produce the same meaning in English. Therefore, translator focuses on the target culture and employs free translation to ensure the connotative meaning is successfully conveyed.

From the above analysis, it can be said that free translation is certainly proper for the modern readers, especially for western readers.

3.2.2 Substitution

Mona Baker thinks that substitution means the replacement of the target culture-specific items for original culture-specific items. Therefore, substituting the original culture-loaded words can help the target reader easily understand the original writer’s purposes in his particular cognitive environment. The examples of social, religious as well as linguistic culture-loaded words as follows:

(a) “如今, 要革掉这个王八犊子的狗命, 他是称心快意的。”——《暴风骤雨》(Zhou, 1954)

“Now the work team had come to deal with this enemy of his, this son of a bitch! He felt elated.” (Xu, 1955, p.34)

(b) “庙祝起初执意不允许, 直到她急得流泪, 才勉强答应了。”——《祝福》(Lu, 1932)

“At first the priest refused, only giving a grudging consent after she was reduced to tears of desperation.” (Yang, 2009)

CONCLUSION

When talking about the strategies in translating Chinese culture-loaded words, foreignization and domestication are two main translation strategies on Chinese culture-loaded words. Foreignization and domestication have many different viewpoints on the treatment of cultural elements in translation, but they can coexist.

Foreignization in translation will be a general trend, while the necessity of domestication can not be undervalued. Therefore, according to different types of Chinese culture-loaded words many appropriate translation methods from Foreignization and domestication have been applied in this paper, such as transliteration, free translation, literal translation, substitution, amplification, etc..

Because of the limited competence of the author, this paper has some limitations, some topics such as function of Chinese culture-loaded words, translatability of Chinese culture-loaded words and its limitations are not explained in details. Moreover, as culture is rather complicated, the study of translation strategies on Chinese culture-loaded words can not be perfect. Therefore, in order to make a better translation of Chinese culture-loaded words, further systematically research on translation strategies of Chinese culture-loaded words is necessary, especially in the field of some topics that have not been explained in details. In the same way, complicated as culture is, translators should make efforts to put theory into practice, and put forward more appropriate translation strategies based on famous translation theories. Meanwhile, the most important part is to combine proper translation methods with diversified Chinese culture-loaded words, thus the perfect translation strategies on Chinese culture-loaded words may be achieved.

Research on the translation strategies of Chinese culture-loaded words is a never ceasing process. This paper is only a tentative research. It remains open to be discussed and improved. The author sincerely hopes that the thesis will make certain contribution to the translation strategies of Chinese culture-loaded words.

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