

Original Paper

Translation of Culture-Specific Items from the Perspective of “New Northeast Literature”: A Case Study of the English Translation of *Moses on the Plain*

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Abstract

*This thesis aims to investigate the translation strategies for culture-specific items in the English translation of *Moses on the Plain*, a representative work of “New Northeast Literature”, so as to provide a practical reference for the overseas reception of contemporary regional Chinese literature. Adopting Aixelá’s theory of culture-specific items as the core framework and incorporating the cultural classification models of Newmark and Nida, the study selects typical examples from four dimensions—ecological, material, social, and linguistic culture—for analysis. The thesis shows that the translator tends to employ retention strategies such as transliteration and literal translation for ecological culture-specific items; the absolute universalization strategy for material culture-specific items; a combination of literal translation and absolute universalization for social culture-specific items; and free translation and functional equivalence for linguistic culture-specific items. Overall, the translator seeks a balance between “cultural authenticity” and “reader acceptability”, prioritizing the readability and communicative intent of the target text.*

Keywords

Moses on the Plain, New Northeast Literature, culture-specific items, translation strategy

1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, the rise of “New Northeast Literature” has become one of the most noteworthy literary phenomena in the landscape of contemporary Chinese literature. In 2015, Shuang Xuetao’s novella *Moses on the Plain* was published in Harvest and was regarded as the symbolic starting point of this literary wave. Subsequently, a group of post-1980s Northeast Chinese writers represented by Shuang Xuetao, Ban Yu, and Zheng Zhi—who share a common regional background, similar creative themes and aesthetic styles—have been recognized by scholars as the “New Northeast Writers’ Group” or the “Tiexi Three Swordsmen”. Scholar Huang Ping summarizes their significance as follows: “The rise of the ‘New Northeast Writers’ Group’ will signify not merely a change in ‘Northeast literature,’ but a change in literature that begins from the Northeast” (Huang Ping, 2020).

“New Northeast Literature” is grounded in the historical context of the magnificent industrialization process that took place in Northeast China, known as the “first son of the Republic”, in the early years of the People’s Republic of China. This land gathered countless industrial workers and technical backbones, achieving countless “firsts” in the industrial history of New China and establishing a solid foundation for the country’s industrialization. This history gave rise to a distinctive industrial culture and working-class spirit. “New Northeast Literature” carries on the century-old tradition of Northeast China’s industrial literature, steadfastly upholding the spirit of realism, fostering the resilience and perseverance of workers, and following two developmental paths—traditional literature and online literature—to shape new youth images of “road-runners” and “strivers” (Hu Zhe, 2024).

With a strong sense of presence, it depicts the industrial ethos of contemporary China. From the perspective of narrative features, the most distinctive hallmark of “New Northeast Literature” is the widespread use of the “first-generation-child perspective”—writers extensively adopt the viewpoint of the “first-generation child”, looking back as historical “latecomers” at the glorious and arduous years of their fathers’ struggles (Huang Ping, 2020). They are not writing about suffering, but through retrospection, they grasp the glory and perseverance of their fathers as “builders of the Republic. Shuang Xuetao’s *Moses on the Plain* is a typical embodiment of this narrative structure: the novel connects the fates of multiple characters through the perspective of “I” (Zhuang Shu & He Shaojun, 2024), and beneath its suspenseful narrative exterior, it envelops a profound reverence for workers’ culture and industrial spirit (Liu Tianyu, 2025).

It is worth noting that in the literary world that is constructed in *Moses on the Plain*, a large number of linguistic elements bearing distinct regional cultural markers constitute its unique narrative texture. From material cultural symbols such as the kang (heated brick bed), enamel basin, and red cotton-padded jacket, to social cultural terms carrying specific historical memories like Red Flag Square, supply and marketing cooperative, educated youth, ice top spinning, and fitter, and further to dialectal expressions full of Northeast Chinese regional flavor such as “Xiao Zhuang” (a nickname),

“doing what”, and “damn it”—these culture-specific items are both the source of the novel’s regional authenticity and the most challenging translation obstacles in the process of cross-language transfer. How to effectively convey these culture-specific items rooted in particular historical and geographical contexts to English readers is a core issue that cannot be avoided in the overseas translation and introduction of “New Northeast Literature” (Jin Gang & Wang Lu, 2025). Therefore, it is necessary to introduce the theory of culture-specific items as an analytical tool to examine the translation strategies adopted by translators when dealing with different types of culture-specific items, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, it is very necessary to introduce the theory of culture-specific items as an analytical tool to examine the translation strategies adopted by translators when dealing with different types of culture-specific items, as well as their strengths and weaknesses.

This paper takes Aixelá’s theory of culture-specific items as its core framework, integrates the cultural classifications of Newmark (1988) and Nida (1964), and examines the translation strategies for culture-specific items in the English translation of *Moses on the Plain* from four dimensions—material culture, social culture, ecological culture, and linguistic culture. It explores how to achieve effective cross-cultural communication of contemporary literature with distinctive regional cultural markers from the perspective of “New Northeast Literature”.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Definition and Connotation of Culture-Specific Items

Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) are a core concept in translation studies for addressing cross-cultural obstacles. Spanish translation theorist Javier Aixelá defined them in 1996 as: those items in the source text that either do not have a corresponding item in the cultural system of the target language reader or have a different textual status, whose translation difficulty arises from the absence of a relevant counterpart in the target language’s cultural system or from ideological differences. Such items, which cause the status of the item to differ between the source text and the target text, are called culture-specific items (Aixelá J. F., 1996).

Mona Baker proposed the concept of “semantic gaps”, pointing out that when the target language has no equivalent expression for the concept conveyed by a source language word, a characteristic translation difficulty specific to culture-specific items arises (Baker, M., 2018). Peter Newmark, from the perspective of cultural categories, divided culture-specific items into five major types: ecological culture, material culture, social culture, organizational and customary culture, as well as gestures and habits (Newmark, P., 1988). Actually, Nida, meanwhile, conducted systematic analyses of linguistic culture. These theoretical frameworks provide a systematic methodological foundation for the identification and analysis of culture-specific items (Nida, E., 1964).

2.2 Classification of Culture-Specific Items and Translation Strategies

To conduct a systematic analysis of culture-specific items, it is first necessary to establish a scientific classification framework. Drawing on the cultural classifications of Newmark (Newmark, P., 1988).

and Nida (Nida, E., 1964) as well as the scholarly supplements regarding linguistic culture-specific items, the culture-specific items in *Moses on the Plain* are divided into the following four dimensions:

- 1) Material culture-specific items: refer to things in a particular culture that have a unique material form, including everyday objects, architecture, food, tools etc. (the kang (heated brick bed), enamel basin, and red cotton-padded jacket).
- 2) Social culture-specific items: refer to social institutions, forms of address, work and leisure patterns, and so on. Examples include “technical guru”, “big wang”, “eighth-grade fitter” etc.
- 3) Ecological culture-specific items: including natural features such as geography, climate, flora and fauna, etc. Examples contain “the Hun River”, “Chessboard Hill”, “Su Village” etc.
- 4) Linguistic culture-specific items: refer to dialectal expressions, idioms, swear words, and other items with regional linguistic characteristics. Examples embrace “nothing too serious” (mǎ shénme dà shì) and “frighten” etc.

Once the classification is established, it is necessary to examine the conversion methods for each type of culture-specific item with the help of concrete translation strategies. Aixelá based on the degree of cross-cultural manipulation from low to high, proposed eleven translation strategies, which can be divided into two major types: retention strategies (including repetition, orthographic adaptation, linguistic translation, extra-textual gloss, and intra-textual gloss) and substitution strategies (including synonymy, limited universalization, absolute universalization, naturalization, deletion, and autonomous creation). The following section will conduct a case study of the English translation of *Moses on the Plain* by integrating the above classification and strategic framework.

3. Analysis of Translation Strategies for Culture-Specific Items in *Moses on the Plain*

As mentioned above, culture-specific items are divided into four major categories. Set against the historical backdrop of the reform of state-owned enterprises in Northeast China during the 1990s, *Moses on the Plain* intertwines suspenseful narration with profound humanistic concern. The novella contains numerous linguistic and cultural elements unique to Northeast China, as well as many scenes that recreate the region’s past history, making it difficult for the translator to find exact equivalents in the target language. Therefore, in order to facilitate cross-cultural communication and disseminate the distinctive culture of “New Northeast Literature”, and guided by Aixelá’s theory, this paper draws on the cultural classification frameworks of Newmark (1988) and Nida (1964) to adopt different translation methods and strategies for handling culture-specific items in the text.

3.1 Translation of Ecological Culture-Specific Items

Ecological culture-specific items refer to words or expressions in the source text that involve natural environmental features specific to a particular region, mainly including names of flora and fauna, geographical features (mountains, rivers, plains), climatic phenomena, and the like. The cultural specificity of such items arises from differences in the natural environments in which different language communities live (Newmark, P., 1988). The following section also focuses on citing several representative translations for analysis.

Example 1

Source text: 我说喜欢游泳，夏天在浑河里游。

Target text: I said I liked swimming; the Hun River in summer.

“浑河” is translated as “the Hun River”. It adopts the strategy of transliteration. First, the Hun River was called the “Shen River” in ancient times, and the name “Shenyang” originates from the traditional principle that “the north of a mountain is yin, the north of a river is yang”, meaning that Shenyang is located to the north of the Shen River. The name “Hun River” derives from its turbulent flow carrying abundant sediment, a record first seen in the History of Liao. Entering the 20th century, the Hun River witnessed the industrial miracle of Shenyang as the “first son of the Republic”. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, nurtured by the Hun River, hundreds of “firsts in the industrial history of New China” were born here, forging the industrial soul of Shenyang. “Hun River” is the name of a river flowing through the urban area of Shenyang. The translator renders it phonetically as “Hun”, preserving the source language pronunciation characteristics of the place name, thus retaining the cultural specificity of the toponym while ensuring basic comprehension for readers.

Example 2

Source text: 最后，那年冬天，终于把他们堵在市北头儿的棋盘山上。

Target text: Finally, that winter, we cornered them on Chessboard Hill, to the north of the city.

“棋盘山” is translated as “Chessboard Hill”. It adopts the translation strategy of literal translation. The old name of Qipan Mountain was “Longshan” (Dragon Mountain), which is itself full of mythological color. According to the legend, a black dragon and a white dragon once confronted each other here, and their bodies eventually turned into the mountain, hence the name. As an ecological barrier in eastern Shenyang, a cultural tourism highlight, and the city’s back garden, the “spiritual vein” of Qipan Mountain has wound its way from the vast green mountains, carrying the historical imaginings of the rise and fall of dynasties over thousands of years, evolving into a local spiritual symbol and cultural icon. The translator adopts linguistic translation, rendering “chessboard” as “Chessboard” and “mountain” as “Hill”, corresponding word-for-word to the composition of the source term, thus fully preserving the semantic information of the place name’s morphological structure. This retains the cultural image of the place name while ensuring the readability of the translation.

Example 3

Source text: 小东说拉过三个有嫌疑的男的，要去苏家屯，他就小心起来，听他们说话，是本市口音。

Target text: Xiaodong said he'd picked up three suspicious-looking men with local accents who wanted to go as far away as Su Village, which put him on alert.

“苏家屯” is translated as “Su Village”, adopting the strategy of transliteration. Su Village is one of the earliest established areas in Shenyang, with a history that can be traced back to Gaoxian County in the Western Han Dynasty, even older than the city of Shenyang itself. The place name evolved from “Shuiya Tun” (Water Duck Village) in the early Qing Dynasty through harmonic refinement and, due to its large population, became known as the “Number One Village Under Heaven”. The area is home to legends of Emperor Taizong of Tang's eastern expedition, as well as intangible cultural heritage such as Liaoning embroidery and traditional suona music, making it a region of multi-ethnic integration and rich folk culture.

First, “Sujia” serves as the specific part of the place name. The translator adopts orthographic adaptation, transliterating it as “Su”, preserving the pronunciation characteristics of the source language—a retention strategy according to Aixel's framework. Second, “屯” in Chinese specifically refers to a settlement form in northern Chinese villages, distinguished from “村” in the south, but there is no exact equivalent in English. Instead of literally translating it as “tun” or retaining it through transliteration, the translator uses the English common word “Village” as a substitution. This treatment preserves the pronunciation features of the place name while ensuring conciseness and readability of the translation.

3.2 Translation of Material Culture-Specific Items

Material culture-specific items refer to words or expressions in the source text that involve tangible objects created and used by a particular cultural community, mainly including architecture and dwellings, clothing, food and drink, everyday objects, means of transportation, and the like. The cultural specificity of such items arises from differences in the modes of production and ways of life among different cultural communities.

Example 4

Source text: 到了苏家屯，灵棚已经搭好。

Target text: They arrived at Su Village to find the funeral tent already set up.

“灵棚” is translated as “funeral tent”, adopting the strategy of absolute universalization. The term “灵棚” appears frequently in Northeast literature, especially in the works of writers such as Shuang Xuetao and Xiao Hong. Through her depictions of death, Xiao Hong reveals her outlook on life and death as well as her national consciousness, while also showing the resilient spirit of the Northeast people. However, funeral tent carries specific regional experiences and conceptions of life and death unique to

Northeast China. In traditional funerals, it is not merely a shelter against wind and rain, but a symbolic space where life and death, mourning and dignity converge (Cui, 2023). In fact, Northeast Chinese folk customs are deeply influenced by Confucian thought, which is also vividly reflected and manifested in Xiao Hong's works (Cui, 2025). The translator chooses "funeral tent"—"funeral" indicates its mortuary function, while "tent" describes its temporary, erected form—thereby ensuring the readability and communicative efficiency of the translation.

Example 5

Source text: 只要不抬头，遍地是茅楼。

Target text: If you aren't fussy, anywhere can be a toilet.

“茅楼” is translated as “toilet”, adopting the strategy of absolute universalization. This is a piece of Northeast Chinese slang with no equivalent expression in English. The source text is a subjectless sentence, creating a universal admonitory tone by omitting the subject “you”. English, however, emphasizes syntactic completeness; thus, the translation supplies the implicit subject “you” and uses a conditional clause “if...not...” to reproduce the logical relationship of the original “as long as...then...” The translator employs a strategy of dilution, replacing the action of “looking up” with the morally tinged adjective “fussy” (implying pickiness or fastidiousness), thereby converting physical action into a psychological attitude. This weakens the original's straightforward physiological implication, aligning with the tendency in English culture to avoid crude expressions. Meanwhile, the modal verb “can be” transforms the absolute judgment expressed by the Chinese copula “is” into a more tentative, polite expression in English. Finally, the structure “anywhere...toilet” compensates for the hyperbolic rhetoric of “outhouses everywhere”, accomplishing a cross-cultural transfer from a regional colloquialism to general English while preserving semantic function.

3.3 Translation of Social Culture-Specific Items

Social culture-specific items refer to words or expressions in the source text that involve the social organizational structure, social institutions, interpersonal relationships, and social behaviors of a particular cultural community, mainly including work and leisure patterns, address systems, kinship relations, social strata, political and administrative systems, and the like. The cultural specificity of such items arises from differences in the ways different cultural communities organize their societies.

Example 6

Source text: 大王在严打的时候受过镇压，小王在部队里待过。

Target text: Big Wang had been roughed up during the crackdowns, and Little Wang had spent some time in the army.

“大王” is translated as “Big Wang” and “小王” are translated as “Little Wang”, adopting the strategy of literal translation (linguistic translation). In the Chinese context, “Big Wang” and “Little Wang” are often used to address brothers or companions of the same surname, distinguishing the elder from the

younger. The terms carry a colloquial, somewhat roguish nuance, while also implying an informal intimacy or hierarchy.

The target text uses the parallel structure of “Big Wang” and “Little Wang” to clearly distinguish the two characters and convey differences in age or seniority. However, this translation may lose the brotherly camaraderie, the sense of an informal circle, and the slightly humorous regional flavor inherent in the Chinese “Big Wang and Little Wang”, making the character relationships appear more straightforward and less culturally specific. For readers seeking the authentic flavor of regional literature, this treatment may result in some loss of character traits and relational atmosphere in cross-cultural communication.

3.4 Translation of Linguistic Culture-Specific Items

Linguistic culture-specific items refer to words or expressions in the source text that involve the formal linguistic features of a particular language community, mainly including dialectal words, idioms, swear words, address habits, modal particles, and other expressions with regional linguistic characteristics. The cultural specificity of such items arises from differences in language use among different language communities (Nida E., 1964).

Example 7

Source text: 抓了不少人，事儿都不大，跳跳舞，夜不归宿，小偷小摸，我以为地方上也就是这些案子，没什么大事儿。

Target text: We nabbed plenty of people—nothing too serious, just held them overnight and made them sweat a bit.

“没什么大事儿” is translated as “nothing too serious”, adopting free translation. This is a common expression in Northeast colloquial Chinese, meaning “the matter is not serious, no big problem”. It carries a relaxed, downplaying pragmatic function, reflecting the straightforward and bold character of the Northeast people. The translator does not render it literally as “there is no big matter”, but instead chooses the everyday English expression “nothing too serious”, conveying the meaning and tone of the source text concisely and naturally. At the same time, this translation reflects a domestication orientation, replacing the source form with a target-language idiomatic expression, thereby ensuring the fluency and readability of the translation.

Example 8

Source text: 他说，妈，你别唬我。

Target text: You’re just trying to frighten me, Mom.

“唬” is translated as “frighten”, adopting free translation and functional equivalence. 唬 is a dialectal word in Northeast colloquial Chinese, meaning “to scare” or “to deceive”, carrying colloquial and regional flavor. The translator does not render it literally as “bluff” or “intimidate”, nor does she retain the dialectal form; instead, she chooses the English common word “frighten”, accurately conveying the

core meaning of “causing fear”. This treatment represents a functional equivalence strategy—the cognitive response evoked in English readers is essentially the same as that in Chinese readers. Furthermore, the entire sentence 你别唬我 is rendered as “You’re just trying to frighten me”, converting the dialectal expression into natural and fluent spoken English, reflecting a domestication orientation. In summary, this translation prioritizes semantic transfer, sacrificing the regional cultural flavor of the dialect word while ensuring effective communication of the intended message.

4. Conclusion

This thesis, taking Aixela’s theory of culture-specific items as its core framework and integrating the cultural classifications of Newmark and Nida, has analyzed the translation strategies for culture-specific items in the English translation of *Moses on the Plain* from four dimensions: ecological, material, social, and linguistic culture. The findings show that the translator tends to employ retention strategies such as transliteration and literal translation for ecological culture-specific items; the absolute universalization strategy for material culture-specific items; a combination of literal translation and absolute universalization for social culture-specific items; and free translation and functional equivalence for linguistic culture-specific items.

On the whole, the translator strikes a balance between “cultural authenticity” and “reader acceptability”, prioritizing the readability and communicative intent of the target text. This study highlights the uniqueness of regional experience in Northeast Chinese culture, the simplicity of folk life, and the resilient undertone during historical transformation. It provides a strategic reference for the overseas translation and introduction of “New Northeast Literature” and also validates the applicability of culture-specific item theory in the analysis of contemporary regional literary translation. Future research may be extended to more works and reader reception studies to deepen related discussions.

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Note(s)

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