

## Original Paper

# English-Chinese Translation of *Educated: A Memoir* from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology

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### **Abstract**

*Eco-translatology, with adaptation and selection as its core, offers a holistic view of translation from an ecological perspective. It discusses how to achieve adaptive selection in target language translation from three dimensions: linguistic, cultural, and communicative. Drawing on eco-translatology, this paper takes Ren Aihong's Chinese translation of Educated: A Memoir as an example to explore English-Chinese translation of autobiographical literary texts. The translation of autobiographical texts is a process of multi-dimensional selection and adaptation, which should not only remain faithful to the original text but also reflect cultural diversity, thereby gaining recognition and acceptance from target language readers. This paper analyzes how the translator makes adaptive choices through ecological adaptation and achieves optimal adaptive transformation in the target language ecology from the three dimensions of language, culture, and communication.*

### **Keywords**

*eco-translatology, autobiographical literature, three-dimensional transformations, Educated: A Memoir*

### **1. Introduction**

*Educated: A Memoir* is an autobiographical memoir by American author Tara Westover, first published in 2018. Written from a first-person perspective, the book recounts the author's real-life journey of growing up in an extremely isolated, dysfunctional family, never receiving formal schooling, and eventually, through sheer determination, earning a Ph.D. in history from the University of Cambridge within a decade, while also achieving inner healing. The work vividly portrays Tara's psychological transformation and changing family relationships before and after her education, creating memorable characters such as her rigid and domineering father, her submissive mother, and her gentle yet courageous brother Tyler. It powerfully reveals the transformative power of education on individual

consciousness, as well as the difficult choices between family ties and self-awakening. The Chinese translation of the book, rendered by Ren Aihong, was published in October 2019 and quickly became a reading sensation, selling over one million copies within its first hundred days.

Eco-translatology is a Chinese indigenous translation theory proposed by Professor Hu Gengshen in 2001. This theory integrates translation studies with ecology, drawing on the concepts of “adaptation” and “selection” from Darwin’s theory of evolution. It defines translation as “a selection activity of the translator adapting to the translational eco-environment.” Its core principle can be summarized as “multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptive selection,” emphasizing the translator’s leading role in the translation process. Specifically, the theory operationalizes this through “three-dimensional” transformations—the linguistic dimension, the cultural dimension, and the communicative dimension—to achieve an effective transfer from the source language to the target language. The linguistic dimension focuses on the transformation of lexical and syntactic forms; the cultural dimension emphasizes conveying the cultural connotations behind different languages, avoiding misinterpretation of the source language from the perspective of the target culture; and the communicative dimension attends to the reproduction of the source text’s communicative intention in the target language.

This paper intends to take eco-translatology as its theoretical framework and, by examining representative examples from Ren Aihong’s translation, analyze how the translator achieves adaptation and selection through the “three-dimensional” transformations, thereby exploring the explanatory power of this theory in literary translation.

## **2. Case Analysis of the Chinese Translation of *Educated: A Memoir* under the Three-Dimensional Framework of Eco-Translatology**

### *2.1 Linguistic Dimension*

Eco-translatology focuses on adaptation and selection between the source language and the target language. It no longer regards translation as a mere process of linguistic conversion but, guided by multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptive selection, integrates the translation process with practice, establishing a target language ecology that corresponds to the source language ecology in the translated text. Specifically for autobiographical literature, translators, while converting between languages, must fully consider the linguistic differences between Chinese and English, such as vocabulary, syntax, textual organization, and rhetorical devices. The translation should convey the linguistic features of the source text as much as possible, while ensuring that it conforms to the expression habits of the target language to achieve better reader acceptance. This section discusses the adaptive selection at the linguistic dimension from the levels of vocabulary and syntax.

#### 2.1.1 Lexical Level

##### Example 1

Source text: Grandma was a force of nature—impatient, aggressive, self-possessed. (Westover, 2018, p.

4)

Target text: 奶奶性情强势—急躁, 咄咄逼人, 坚持己见. (Ren, 2019, p. 8)

Analysis: A literal translation of “a force of nature” as “自然的力量” would be awkward and depart from Chinese conventions for character description. The translator rendered it as “性情强势” and then used two four-character phrases “咄咄逼人” and “坚持己见” to intensify the characterization. Four-character phrases in Chinese are concise, harmonious in sound, and often used to depict characters vividly. Instead of a word-for-word rendering, the translator captured the core semantics of “strong, impatient, self-possessed” and recoded it in a way familiar to Chinese readers. From the perspective of eco-translatology, this reflects the translator’s active adaptation to Chinese expression habits—she judged that target readers expect concise and vivid character portrayals rather than rigid literal translations. This treatment not only conveys the original information but also shapes a distinct character image in a familiar Chinese style, achieving adaptive transformation at the linguistic dimension.

#### Example 2

Source text: I can fetch you when The End comes, bring you home, make you safe. (Westover, 2018, p. 251)

Target text: 世界末日来临时我可以去接你, 带你回家, 让你平平安安的. (Ren, 2019, p. 294)

Analysis: A literal rendering of “make you safe” as “使你安全” would be stiff and unnatural in daily Chinese discourse. The translator converted it into “平平安安”, using a reduplicated word to enhance meaning. It is a common reduplicated expression in Chinese conveying safety and peace, with warm and intimate overtones. From an eco-translatological perspective, the translator made two adaptations: first, converting the English adjective “safe” into a reduplicated state description, adapting to the dynamic descriptive nature of Chinese; second, replacing a single adjective with a reduplicated word to meet Chinese readers’ psychological expectations of warm family discourse. This transformation conveys the father’s protective affection and intensifies the warm, reassuring emotional color through the rhythmic effect of reduplication, achieving ecological equivalence at the lexical level.

#### 2.1.2 Syntactic Level

##### Example 3

Source text: We were in Cornish, a farming town twenty miles south of Buck’s Peak, when the station wagon drifted over the center line into the other lane, then left the highway. The car jumped a ditch, smashed through two utility poles of thick cedar, and was finally brought to a stop only when it collided with a row-crop tractor. (Westover, 2018, p. 144)

Target text: 在巴克峰以南二十英里的一个农业小镇康沃尔, 旅行车偏离了中间线, 进入逆行车道, 然后离开公路, 跳过一个沟渠, 接连撞倒两根粗大的雪松木电线杆, 最后撞上一辆中耕拖拉机才停了下来. (Ren, 2019, p. 169)

Analysis: The original consists of two long sentences containing multiple consecutive actions and temporal adverbials. Structurally, English uses conjunctions such as “when”, “and”, and “only when” to

connect actions, reflecting the “hypotactic” nature of English. The translator merged the two long sentences into one long Chinese sentence but presented it as a cluster of short clauses separated by commas, omitting all conjunctions—a technique that reflects the “paratactic” style of Chinese, which relies on word order and semantic coherence rather than conjunctions to convey logical relations. From an eco-translatological perspective, the translator made a clear adaptive choice: she did not retain the English conjunction structure (which would result in severe Europeanized Chinese) but completely reorganized the sentence using Chinese paratactic methods. Research has noted that this treatment renders paragraph transitions very natural, reflecting the translator’s active adaptation to the Chinese linguistic ecological environment.

#### Example 4

Source text: The pages were glossy and soft, made softer by the hours I’d spent hauling scrap. (Westover, 2018: 61)

Target text: 长时间拖拽废品, 使得光滑柔软的书页在我手中显得愈加柔软. (Ren, 2019, p. 72)

Analysis: The original passive structure “were made softer by” was converted into an active structure meaning “使得...显得...”. English passive voice is far more frequent than its use in Chinese, a significant difference between the two languages. Research has found that translators tend to convert passive to active when handling such structures. However, the translator’s treatment here is more subtle: she not only changed passive to active but also restructured the information flow—moving “the hours I’d spent hauling scrap” to the front as the subject and “the pages” to the back as the object. This serves to present the cause first (long hours of labor) and then the result (the pages feel softer), making the causal logic clearer. At the same time, the use of “使得” transforms an objective description into a subjective expression, and the addition of “在我手中” enhances the sense of personal experience. From an eco-translatological perspective, the translator achieved triple adaptation: grammatical (passive to active), logical (causal restructuring), and emotional (enhanced sense of experience), making this a typical example of adaptive transformation at the linguistic dimension.

#### 2.2 Cultural Dimension

Language serves as the carrier of culture and directly reflects its external characteristics; the two are closely intertwined. Communication difficulties arising from linguistic differences caused by Chinese and Western cultural disparities can be addressed through adaptive selection and transformation in the cultural dimension. As Hu Gengshen points out, “In the cultural dimension, adaptive selection and transformation require the translator to attend to the transmission and interpretation of the cultural connotations embedded in the two languages.” Translators must possess cultural awareness to overcome the challenges of cultural differences and respect the cultural diversity between languages.

#### Example 5

Source text: Mother was again hefting plastic jugs of “Western Family 2%” into the fridge... (Westover, 2018, p. 45)

Target text: 母亲又重新把“西方家庭”牌低脂奶的塑料罐子塞进冰箱.....(Ren, 2019, p. 53)

Analysis: In the U.S., products are labeled with direct fat content percentages (e.g., 2%), while in China, qualitative classifications such as “低脂” or “全脂” are used. A literal translation as “脂肪含量 2%的牛奶” would be awkward and confusing for Chinese readers—there is no such category as “2% milk” in Chinese supermarkets. The translator rendered it as “低脂奶”, a crucial cultural conversion. Research has noted that this treatment aligns with Chinese habits and avoids comprehension barriers. From an eco-translatological perspective, the translator actively abandoned the precise numerical expression of the source culture and adopted the fuzzy categorical expression of the target culture, a typical application of the “domestication” strategy in the cultural dimension. On a deeper level, the translator retained “西方家庭” (Western Family) through transliteration plus semantic translation, preserving the exotic feel of the brand, while domesticating “2%” to ensure the core information is understandable. This layered strategy of “brand foreignization + attribute domestication” reflects the translator’s precise judgment of different types of cultural information.

#### Example 6

Source text: Dad said, “It’ll take half the morning to teach her the controls, and she still won’t know what the hell she’s doing.” (Westover, 2018, p. 141)

Target text: 爸爸说：“她将花半个上午的时间才能弄明白操作装置，而且还是会不知道自己在干什么”。(Ren, 2019, p. 167)

Analysis: The original text uses “what the hell,” a mild vulgarity that conveys the father’s impatience, contempt, and authoritarian attitude. In English cultures, such expressions are common in daily family discourse and serve to characterize a rough, domineering figure. In Chinese culture, however, direct equivalents of such vulgar language carry stronger offensiveness and are generally avoided in published literary translations, especially when spoken by a parent to a child. Ren’s translation completely omits the vulgar tone, rendering the phrase as the neutral “不知道自己在干什么.” This is an active adaptation to the target cultural ecology — specifically, to Chinese publishing norms, family discourse conventions, and reader expectations. The translator judged that preserving the crude tone would risk sounding excessively harsh or unnatural to Chinese readers, potentially undermining the readability and cultural acceptability of the translation. By softening the father’s language, Ren prioritizes cultural fluency over literal fidelity. However, this choice also entails a loss: the father’s impatience and rough demeanor are less vividly conveyed than in the original. The translation therefore represents a trade-off — it gains acceptability in the target culture at the expense of some characters’ disposition and details.

### 2.3 Communicative Dimension

Adaptive selection and transformation in the communicative dimension require the translator to consider the ecological contexts of both languages, bringing the linguistic forms and cultural connotations as close as possible to the target readers, so as to achieve effective delivery of the communicative intention in the target text.

#### Example 7

Source text: “Bring him home,” Dad said. “Your mother will deal with it.” ... “Bring him home,” Dad said. “Your mother can handle it.” Then: the dull drone of a dial tone. He’d hung up. (Westover, 2018, p. 146)

Target text: “把他带回家，”爸爸说，“你母亲会处理的。”.....“带他回家，”爸爸说，“你母亲能处理。”接着是一阵单调的嘟嘟声。他挂了电话。(Ren, 2019, p. 171)

Analysis: This dialogue occurs after her brother Shawn was severely injured, and Tara asks her father for help. The father twice uses the imperative “bring him home,” his tone cold and unyielding, refusing to seek medical help and merely telling the mother to “deal with it.” The translator, through the repetition of the imperative “把他带回家” and the subtle change from “会处理” to “能处理”, accurately conveys the father’s authoritarianism and indifference. Research has noted that this dialogue, through its register, vividly depicts the characters and the power dynamics between the father and daughter. From the communicative dimension, the translator faced a challenge: how to make Chinese readers feel the same “coldness” as English readers? The English “bring him home” is an imperative without a subject, which sounds harsh; the Chinese equivalent “带他回家” is also imperative but less forceful. The translator creates an uncompromising atmosphere through repetition and the decisive “他挂了电话”. Particularly noteworthy is the conversion of “dial tone” into the onomatopoeia “嘟嘟声”—while English readers naturally associate “dial tone” with hanging up, Chinese readers are more familiar with this sound. This seemingly minor conversion is key to the communicative dimension: it allows Chinese readers to instantly form the same associations with the scene and emotional experience as source language readers, achieving precise transmission of the original communicative intention.

#### Example 8

Source text: I had never allowed myself to imagine what happened after—Dad’s decision to leave him by the pickup or the worried looks that must have passed between Luke and Benjamin. (Westover, 2018, p. 170)

Target text: 我从未允许自己想象之后发生了什么—爸爸决定把他留在皮卡边，或者卢克和本杰明彼此交换担心的眼神。(Ren, 2019, p. 199)

Analysis: This is the narrator’s inner monologue when recalling a traumatic event. The original uses “had never allowed myself to imagine,” indicating an active psychological repression—she deliberately avoids imagining because it is too painful. The translation adopts a literal approach and preserves the dash and the parallel structure. From the communicative dimension, this literal translation, though somewhat awkward (the rendering “never allowed herself to imagine” is more bookish than “never dared to imagine”), more accurately conveys the narrator’s psychological state: it is not “dare not” but “does not allow”—a conscious, almost compulsive self-control. At the same time, “彼此交换担心的眼神” retains the original’s subtlety, not directly stating “they were worried” but allowing readers to infer from the detail of “looks.” This narrative tone of “pain concealed in calmness” is characteristic of the author Tara Westover’s style. From an eco-translatological perspective, the translator chose a strategy of “form serving content,” sacrificing some fluency for maximum emotional authenticity. She judged

that target readers, through this slightly translated expression, could feel the narrator's inner repression and restraint, rather than needing all emotions to be explicitly stated. This trust in the reader's ability to comprehend is itself a high-level adaptation in the communicative dimension.

#### Example 9

Source text: I did not have the language I have now. (Westover, 2018, p. 210)

Target text: 那时的我还未掌握现在的语言。(Ren, 2019, p. 212)

Analysis: This is a highly philosophical sentence in the book. "Language" here does not refer to a foreign language (e.g., English or Chinese) but to "a discourse system for self-expression and understanding the world"—that is, the ability to think independently, the framework of critical thinking, and the vocabulary for self-narration. Research has noted that the translator's rendering as "语言" might confuse readers. However, this paper argues that the ambiguity of Ren's translation is a strength rather than a weakness. From a communicative dimension, if rendered as "表达能力的词汇", the meaning would be clearer, but the poetic openness of the original would be lost. When Tara wrote this sentence, she herself might not have been able to clearly define what "language" specifically referred to—it is a comprehensive ability encompassing knowledge, thinking, confidence, expression, and many other dimensions. Ren's language in Chinese itself carries metaphorical meanings of "discourse system" and "way of thinking" (e.g., "academic language," "political language"). Therefore, Chinese readers are fully capable of grasping the deeper meaning of "language" from the context. From an eco-translatological perspective, the translator opted for omission rather than explication, trusting the target readers' understanding and respecting the original's poetic quality. In the communicative dimension, appropriate ambiguity can actually be closer to the author's intention—because Tara herself could not clearly define what she lacked, and that ambiguity is itself a reflection of her true psychology. The translator successfully found a balance between "clarity" and "faithfulness," achieving the deep-level communicative intention.

### 3. Conclusion

Autobiographical literary texts focus on the author's individual experiences, inner growth, and emotional world, and possess distinct personal and literary qualities, thereby placing high demands on translation quality. Eco-translatology offers new interpretations and analyses of the translation process, principles, methods, and the translator's role, thereby offering new ideas and methods for effectively improving translation quality. In the translation process, the translator should play a central role, flexibly applying various translation strategies according to the principles of adaptation and selection in eco-translatology to achieve the best results. Through an analysis of Ren Aihong's translation of *Educated: A Memoir*, this paper finds the following: In the linguistic dimension, the translator uses strategies such as four-character phrases, reduplication, segmentation of long sentences, and passive-to-active conversion to make the translation conform to Chinese expression habits, reflecting active adaptation to the Chinese linguistic ecological environment. In the cultural dimension, the

translator adopts domestication strategies for material culture words to eliminate cultural barriers, and retains the original tone for core cultural information such as family power relations to convey cultural connotations, demonstrating a clear stratified processing strategy. In the communicative dimension, through precise scene conversion (e.g., the onomatopoeia for dial tone), restrained emotional expression (e.g., the literal rendering of “never allowed herself to imagine”), and moderate poetic ambiguity (e.g., the rendering of “language”), the translator successfully reproduces the original’s communicative intention and emotional tension. The high acceptance of Ren Aihong’s translation is precisely the result of achieving a high degree of “integrative adaptation and selection” in the three-dimensional transformation. This study demonstrates the explanatory power of eco-translatology in the translation of autobiographical literature.

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