

## *Original Paper*

# On the Translation of Culture-Loaded Words in My Old Home from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology

Liping Liang

School of Foreign Languages, Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, China

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### **Abstract**

*Based on the theoretical framework of Eco-Translatology, this paper examines the translation strategies adopted by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang in rendering culture-loaded words in Lu Xun's My Old Home into English. Drawing on Nida's taxonomy of culture, the study conducts an in-depth analysis of how the translators achieve a three-dimensional transformation: linguistic, cultural, and communicative through a dynamic process of "adaptation and selection" across four cultural dimensions: ecological, material, social, and linguistic. The findings reveal that the translators employ differentiated strategies for different types of culture-loaded words, successfully preserving the cultural identity of the source text while taking into account the acceptability of target-language readers, thus achieving an effective balance between cultural authenticity and communicative effect. This study not only demonstrates the explanatory power of Eco-Translatology in literary translation research but also offers practical insights for cultural transmission through the translation of Chinese literature.*

### **Keywords**

*Eco-Translatology, My Old Home, Culture-loaded words, English translation*

## **1. Introduction**

The core idea of Eco-translatology is that translation activities should take into account multiple factors and be carried out according to these factors and cultural environments and situations. Eco-translatology emphasizes the influence of culture and natural environment, and believes that culture cannot be viewed from a materialistic perspective, but should be understood effectively by considering the complexity and variability of cultural exchange. Eco-translatology provides a new explanation of the nature and process of translation. Thus, it provides translators with a new translation method, translation principles and criteria for judging translations. When translators translate a text, they need to start from "three dimensions", which can be divided into linguistic dimension, communicative dimension and cultural

dimension, so that the translation can reach the degree of multidimensional transformation. The principle of translation is also defined a "multi-dimensional selective adaptation and adaptive selection". In recent years, Eco-Translatology has been applied to the translation of various types of texts. Such as translation of literary classics (Liu Yanming & Zhang Hua, 2012), translation of medical classics (Wu Chunyu & Wang Yinquan, 2015), translation of public signs (Xue Hongguo, 2022), and film subtitle translation (Zhu Jingyan, 2017).

Culture-loaded words, also known as culture-specific items, are linguistic expressions that directly reflect and embody the unique features of a particular culture. They refer to words or phrases that carry distinctive cultural information, mirror the material and spiritual life of a specific ethnic group, and often lack exact equivalents in other languages. Like a prism, these words refract a nation's historical traditions, lifestyles, values, social customs, and modes of thinking, forming the most culturally distinctive core of a language. Since their meanings are deeply rooted in unique cultural contexts, they pose significant challenges in cross-linguistic transfer and have thus become a central focus in translation studies and intercultural communication research.

This study adopts Nida's (1993: 67) five-category framework for classifying culture-loaded terms and selects representative examples from the English translation of Lu Xun's *My Old Home* for analysis. It aims to explore how the translators actively exercise their subjectivity in the process of translation by adapting to the overall demands of the translational ecosystem across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. Through this adaptive effort, they present target-language readers with fluent translations that remain deeply infused with distinctive Chinese cultural characteristics.

## **2. Principles and Methods of Eco-translatology**

### *2.1 Translators' Adaptation and Selection Principle*

The concept of "adaptation and selection" in Eco-translatology is a product of the combination of ecology and translation. Eco-translatology developed on the basis of the research into the Approach to Translation as Adaptation and Selection or, put differently, the Approach to Translation as Adaptation and Selection was a fundamental theoretical study in the early development of eco-translatology (Hu Gengshen, 2008). In a sense, it is also the inevitable result of the intersection of ecology and translation studies. From the perspective of ecology, there is a sufficient necessity and basis for the emergence of Eco-translatology. From the perspectives of "adaptability" and "choice", "adaptability" means that the translator has already adapted to the environment he or she is in; while "choice" "adaptation" means that the translator has already adapted to the environment, while "choice" means that the translator has already "identified" with the environment, and thus made a corresponding choice. The translator should not only adapt to the ecological environment, but also implement the selection of the translation with the "identity" of the ecological environment.

First, translators must adjust to the ecological context of translation. The "world" offered by the original text, the source language, and the translated language, the "whole of language, communication, culture,

society, and the interconnection and interaction of author, reader, and client," is referred to as the translation ecological environment. The source language, the original language, and the translation language system are all parts of the translation ecological environment, which is the overall environment for the survival state of the translator and the translated text. This environment affects the translator's optimal adaptation and choice. It is not only a collection of multiple factors governing the translator's optimal adaptation and optimal choice, but also the premise and basis for the translator's multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptive choice.

Secondly, Eco-translatology is a translation theory centered on the "translator", which fully reflects the main position and core role of the translator in translation activities. The translator is free to utilize all of his or her advantages and make all selections on their own. Although Eco-translatology emphasizes the subjective initiative of the translator, after the translation is formed, the natural law of the translation ecological environment "survival of the fittest" and "elimination of the weak and retention of the strong" - will have a significant impact on the translator's behavior and the translation process (Hu Gengsheng, 2011). However, "translator-centered" and "translator-led" are only one kind of the translation process and translator's behavior in which the Eco-translatology ethics principle of "translator responsibility" is reflected.

## *2.2 Three-dimensional Conversion*

Eco-translatology is a research paradigm as well as a research method, which includes language, culture and communication. The transformation from these three dimensions is the main methodology of Eco-translatology. Based on the isomorphic metaphor of translation ecology and natural ecology, the Eco-translatology approach is summarized from the perspective of ecology, and the translation ecology is systematically discussed. Text Ecology and Translation Community Ecology and Their Relationship This paper outlines and describes the process of text-translator -reader from an ecological perspective. Ecology and environment are relatively independent and intertwined to form a new category. In the process of translation, translators must choose the ecological environment of the text they translate in order to conform to the ecological environment of translation, so the translation process can also be called the translator's adaptation selection process, which is also the core concept advocated by Eco-translatology science. The so-called "language-dimensional adaptive selection shift" refers to the translator's adaptive selection shift of language forms in the translation process. This linguistic adaptation is carried out in different aspects and at different levels. The "adaptive conversion of the cultural dimension" means that the translator pays attention to the transmission and interpretation of bilingual cultural connotation in the translation process. This cultural dimension of adaptive selection conversion is to pay attention to the differences in nature and content between the source language culture and the translated language culture, to avoid misinterpreting the original text from the translated language cultural point of view, and to pay attention to adapting to the whole cultural system to which the language belongs while translating the source language. The so-called "communicative dimension of adaptive conversion" means that the translator pays attention to the adaptive conversion of bilingual

communicative intentions in the translation process. This communicative dimension of adaptive conversion requires the translator to focus on the communicative level in addition to the conversion of linguistic information and the transmission of cultural connotation, and to pay attention to whether the communicative intent of the original text is reflected in the translation. Obviously, "three-dimensional" conversion mainly occurs at the operational level of translation, and is also a focus of applied research. The three-dimensional conversion theory requires translators to focus on the three dimensions of language, culture and communication when making translation choices. Firstly, the linguistic dimension of adaptive conversion focuses on the level of linguistic forms and other aspects. Secondly, according to Eco-translatology science, in the process of translation, the translator should pay attention to the communication and interpretation between the cultural connotation of the source language and the target language. Finally, the ultimate purpose of translation is the expression of communicative intent.

### 3. Eco-Translatology and the English Translation of *My Old Home*

The selection of Eco-Translatology as the research framework for the English translation of Lu Xun's *My Old Home* is grounded in a strong theoretical affinity. This seminal short story is rich in cultural connotations, and its abundant culture-loaded words form an integrated cultural ecosystem deeply rooted in a specific historical and regional context. The effective transmission of these elements within a heterogeneous cultural environment presents a comprehensive challenge to the translator's capacity for adaptation and selection. The English translation by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, regarded as a model of cross-cultural communication, offers an exemplary case for examining how translators establish an effective dialogue between two cultural ecosystems.

The principle of three-dimensional transformation within Eco-Translatology provides an appropriate analytical tool for systematically examining cultural transfer in the translated text. This theoretical approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the strategies employed by the translators in dealing with different types of cultural elements—specifically, how they perform creative transformations that both preserve the cultural identity of the source text and ensure acceptability for the target-language readership. Examining the translation through this lens not only reveals the translators' successful cross-cultural communication strategies but also offers valuable theoretical and practical insights for the global dissemination of Chinese literary works with distinctive cultural features.

The influential American translation theorist Eugene Nida provided a widely adopted classification framework for culture-loaded words from a cultural-anthropological perspective. He systematically categorized them into the five types: Ecological culture-loaded words, Material culture-loaded words, Social culture-loaded words, Religious culture-loaded words, Linguistic culture-loaded words. This classification offers a comprehensive and clear theoretical framework for identifying, analyzing, and handling culture-loaded words in a systematic manner.

In literary texts, culture-loaded words play an essential role. They are far more than mere referential symbols; they serve as key devices for writers to construct fictional worlds, shape characters' identities,

and deepen thematic resonance. Through these culturally rich expressions, authors vividly recreate specific socio-historical settings, reveal cultural identities, and effectively convey the cultural themes of their works. Together, these words form a dense network of cultural meanings, immersing the text in a unique and rich cultural atmosphere.

#### **4. Translation of Culture-Loaded words in My Old Home**

Language, in its formation and development, reflects and showcases the unique cultural phenomena of a nation. Words are the building blocks of language, and through them, one can gain insight into the cultural fabric of a society (Zheng Dehu, 2016). Eco-translatology emphasizes that translation is an act of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication situated within a specific cultural ecosystem. Culture-loaded words, which carry profound cultural meanings and context-specific connotations, require more than mere linguistic conversion—they demand the transmission and adaptation of cultural information. By examining the differences between the source and target cultural ecosystems, eco-translatology offers a framework for understanding and handling these culturally rich expressions.

Drawing on ecological concepts of "adaptation" and "selection," eco-translatology posits that translation strategies should be adaptively adjusted to the target cultural environment to ensure the translated text can survive and function effectively within it. When translating culture-loaded words, the translator must often choose between preserving original meanings and adapting to target-culture norms—employing, for example, domestication to align with target-culture conventions or foreignization to retain source-culture features. Eco-translatology provides a theoretical basis for such decision-making.

Translation is a process of dynamic balance, striving for functional equivalence between different cultural ecosystems rather than formal correspondence. Thus, the translation of culture-loaded words should convey not only literal meaning, but also achieve functional equivalence in cultural meaning and effect—eliciting a similar response and impact in the target culture. This perspective guides translators in identifying expressions that best adapt to the target cultural context while faithfully conveying the original intent.

In Lu Xun's *My Old Home*, various types of culture-loaded words require the translator to adapt to specific cultural contexts and select appropriate strategies to achieve an effective and resonant translation.

##### *4.1 Ecological Culture-loaded Words*

As early as thirty years ago, Newmark, in his categorization of cultural intervention, discussed the ecological dimension of translation (Newmark, 1988: 95). Ecological Culture-Loaded words refer to vocabulary intimately tied to a specific geographic environment, natural landscape, climate, flora, and fauna. They reflect localized knowledge and ways of interacting with nature, often lacking direct equivalents in regions with different ecological conditions. Examples include names of indigenous animals, plants, landforms, and weather phenomena unique to a culture's natural habitat.

## Example 1:

Source Text: 要管的是獾猪，刺猬，獾。

Target Text: What we have to look out for are badgers, hedgehogs and zha.

This passage depicts the animals that Jun-tu needed to guard against while watching over the watermelon patch, presenting an authentic portrayal of rural life. "獾猪" and "刺猬" are translated using a domesticated approach as "badgers" and "hedgehogs," respectively, as these animals have corresponding concepts in English-speaking cultures, making them easily understandable to readers. In contrast, "獾", being a unique animal in the local dialect, is rendered with a foreignized strategy using the transliteration "zha" to preserve its cultural distinctiveness. This differentiated approach reflects the translator's adaptation to the translational eco-environment: domestication is applied to cultural commonalities to ensure smooth communication, while foreignization is used for cultural specificities to retain cultural identity. This method achieves accurate conveyance at the linguistic dimension while balancing cultural authenticity and reader acceptance at the cultural dimension.

## Example 2:

Source Text: 我们日里到海边检贝壳去，红的绿的都有，鬼见怕也有，观音手也有。

Target Text: In the daytime we'll go to the seashore to look for shells, there are green ones and red ones, besides "scare-devil" shells and "buddha's hands".

This sentence showcases the richness and diversity of coastal life through the variety and peculiar names of seashells. The two shell names, full of folk imagination, "鬼见怕" and "观音手," are creatively translated as "scare-devil shells" and "buddha's hands" respectively. The translator adopts a strategy of literal translation coupled with explanation, preserving the figurative metaphors of the original text at the linguistic dimension, while conveying the folk beliefs in ghosts and gods and the influence of Buddhism in Chinese culture at the cultural dimension. This approach successfully achieves functional equivalence at the communicative dimension: it enables target-language readers to understand that these are types of seashells while also sensing the cultural charm embedded within them. It represents the optimal choice made by the translator after actively adapting to the cultural ecology of the source text.

#### 4.2 Material Culture-Loaded words

Material Culture-Loaded words encompasses words denoting objects, artifacts, and products characteristic of a particular culture's daily life and technological development. It includes traditional clothing, food, architecture, tools, and transportation methods. Such words often pose challenges in translation due to the absence of identical objects or practices in the target culture.

## Example 3:

Source Text: 他头上是一顶破毡帽，身上只一件极薄的棉衣。

Target Text: He wore a shabby felt cap and just one very thin padded jacket.

This sentence depicts the shabby appearance of the adult Jun-tu, reflecting the poverty and hardship of rural life in early 20th century China. "破毡帽" is translated as "a shabby felt cap," where "毡帽" undergoes domestication to adapt to the target language's material culture lexicon, while "破" is rendered

as "shabby," an addition that enhances the description. "极薄的棉衣" is translated as "very thin padded jacket," with "极薄" intensified as "very thin" to emphasize the inadequacy of the clothing against the cold. This translation strategy demonstrates the translator's multidimensional adaptation. At the linguistic dimension, it achieves lexical accuracy and syntactic fluency; at the cultural dimension, it conveys the material characteristics of traditional Chinese rural attire; and at the communicative dimension, the added descriptive words "shabby" and "very thin" effectively evoke the target readers' empathy for the character's plight, fulfilling the communicative intent of portraying Jun-tu's impoverished state.

Example 4:

Source Text: 他拣好了几件东西：两条长桌，四个椅子，一副香炉和烛台，一杆抬秤。

Target Text: He picked out a number of things: two long tables four chairs and incense burner and candlesticks, and one balance.

The translation employs a domestication strategy for all items: "长桌" as "long tables," "椅子" as "chairs," "香炉和烛台" as "incense burner and candlesticks," and "抬秤" as "balance." This approach demonstrates the translator's adaptive selection in the translational eco-environment: at the linguistic dimension, it uses concise and accurate equivalents; at the cultural dimension, it leverages functional correspondence between cultures. For example, "incense burner and candlesticks" resonate with Western religious objects, facilitating cultural understanding. And at the communicative dimension, it ensures smooth comprehension for target readers while preserving the utilitarian and cultural symbolism of the objects. The translation successfully mediates between cultures by choosing appropriate equivalents that maintain the original's material cultural significance without causing cognitive barriers.

#### 4.3 Social Culture-Loaded words

These words are expressions related to social structure, customs, relationships, hierarchies, and institutions within a culture. They include kinship words, forms of address, rituals, and titles that encode social norms and values. Translating them requires careful consideration of the underlying social dynamics often invisible in surface meaning. Due to differences in cultural presuppositions and shared knowledge, people in high-context cultures like China often prioritize implicit understanding in communication, expressing themselves more indirectly (Sun Lin & Han Caihong, 2021).

Example 5:

Source Text: "水生，给老爷磕头。"

Target Text: "Shui-sheng, bow to the master."

In this example, "老爷" is the culturally loaded word. Rooted in China's traditional hierarchical society, it refers to a male elder or figure of authority, embodying social status and respect. From an eco-translatological perspective, translating "老爷" as "master" balances cultural preservation and target-language adaptability. While "master" in English lacks the exact feudal connotations of "老爷," it broadly denotes a person of seniority or esteem, aligning with Western readers' understanding of hierarchical respect. This choice avoids overly literal translations, For example, "old master" that might confuse or alienate, instead selecting a term that fits the target cultural ecology, ensuring the original's intent,

conveying deference to authority.

Example 6:

Source Text: 闰土说着，又叫水生上来打拱。

Target Text: As he was speaking jun-tu motioned Shui-sheng to come and bow.

Here, "打拱" is the culturally loaded term, a traditional Chinese gesture of respect involving crossing hands in a bow. As a culturally specific ritual, it reflects Chinese etiquette norms. Eco-translatologically, rendering "打拱" as "bow" adapts to the target language's expressive habits. Though "bow" simplifies the physical form, it captures the core cultural meaning: a physical act of reverence. This choice prioritizes readability for English readers, as "bow" is a universal gesture of respect in their cultural context. By selecting a familiar equivalent, the translation ensures the original's intent—communicating politeness through action. It is preserved within the target ecological system, avoiding confusion from an overly literal description of the gesture.

#### 4.4 Religious Culture-Loaded words

Religion plays a vital role in human culture, influencing ways of thinking, ethical standards, and ideologies. Chinese culture, deeply shaped by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, emphasizes continuous moral cultivation and elevation to achieve self-discipline and self-redemption (Yu Lixia, 2016). Words falling under this category originate from specific religious beliefs, mythologies, rituals, and spiritual concepts. They include names of deities, philosophical ideas, ceremonial practices, and metaphysical notions. Their translation is complicated by profound differences in belief systems across cultures.

Example 7:

Source Text: 闰月生的，五行缺土，所以他的父亲叫他闰土。

Target Text: Born in the intercalary month and when his horoscope was told it was found that of the five elements that of earth was lacking, so his father called him Jun-tu (intercalary earth).

The religious-cultural loaded term here is "五行" (wuxing), referring to China's ancient philosophical concept of the five elemental forces—metal, wood, water, fire, and earth—which underpins traditional cosmology, astrology, and divination practices, deeply rooted in Taoist and Confucian thought. Eco-translatologically, translating "五行" as "the five elements" balances cultural specificity and target readability. While "five elements" aligns with Western philosophical traditions (e.g., Greek four elements), it retains the core of China's unique cosmological framework. The phrase "of the five elements that of earth was lacking" further clarifies "缺土" ("earth was lacking") to bridge cultural gaps, ensuring English readers grasp the causal link between the birth month, elemental balance, and the name "Jun-tu." This adaptation respects the source culture's religious-philosophical context while making it accessible within the target ecological system, achieving effective cross-cultural communication without oversimplification.

#### 4.5 Linguistic Culture-Loaded words

This type comprises language-specific expressions such as idioms, proverbs, wordplay, and

conventionalized phrases whose meanings are not compositional but deeply embedded in cultural and linguistic conventions. They represent the most challenging category for translation due to their strong dependence on unique linguistic structures and cultural connotations.

Example 8:

Source Text: 夜间，我们又谈些闲天，都是无关紧要的话。

Target Text: That night we talked again, but not of anything serious.

The Chinese idiom "无关紧要" literally means "unrelated and non-urgent," describing something unimportant. The translator renders it as "not of anything serious," completely breaking free from the literal meaning and capturing the core idea of "unimportant." This approach demonstrates the translator's precise adaptation to the translation environment: linguistically, choosing the most natural and direct expression in the target language; culturally, avoiding potential misunderstandings caused by word-for-word translation; and communicatively, successfully conveying the casual atmosphere of "idle chat" in the original text. This achieves harmony across all three dimensions.

Example 9:

Source Text: 也不愿意都如别人的辛苦恣睢而生活。

Target Text: Nor yet, like others to devote all their energies to dissipation.

The classical phrase "辛苦恣睢" depicts a contradictory state of being both hardworking and self-indulgent. The translator creatively translates it as "devote all their energies to dissipation," where "devote all their energies" corresponds to the meaning of "辛苦" (hard work), while "dissipation" accurately captures the sense of reckless wastefulness implied by "恣睢." This translation reflects the translator's strong adaptive skill: based on a deep understanding of the philosophical connotation of the source text, they choose an expression that resonates with target-language readers, preserving the critical tone of the original while ensuring readability. This allows profound cultural criticism to cross language barriers effectively.

Example 10:

Source Text: 而且终日坐着，我也从没有见过这圆规式的姿势。

Target Text: Moreover, she remained seated all the time, so that I had never noticed that this resemblance to a compass.

The linguistic-cultural loaded term here is "圆规式的", a rhetorical device comparing a fixed sitting posture to a compass, emphasizing its rigid, unchanging angle. The translation "resemblance to a compass" employs literal translation to retain the original metaphor. Eco-translatologically, this strategy aligns with "cultural adaptation" by leveraging the shared conceptual understanding of "compass" in both source and target cultures. A compass, as a drawing tool with two legs forming a fixed angle, is visually and functionally recognizable to English readers, mirroring how "圆规" operates in Chinese. By directly translating the metaphor, the translation preserves the vividness of the original imagery, conveying the stiffness and fixedness of the posture, while ensuring target readers can intuitively grasp the comparison through their own knowledge of a compass's shape. This approach balances fidelity to the source's

rhetorical intent with accessibility in the target ecological context, achieving effective communication of the metaphor's descriptive and expressive effects.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, the analysis of various culture-loaded words in the English translation of "My Old Home" clearly demonstrates that Yang Xianyi's translation practice successfully exemplifies the core principles of Eco-translatology. When dealing with different categories of culture-loaded words—ecological, material, social, religious, and linguistic—the translator, with his profound bilingual cultural competence at the center, accurately adapted to the complex "translational eco-environment" and made highly ingenious selective transformations.

Specifically, at the linguistic dimension, the translator flexibly employed various strategies such as literal translation, free translation, transliteration, and explanatory translation to ensure the accuracy and fluency of the target text. At the cultural dimension, through a dynamic balance between domestication and foreignization, he maximally preserved and conveyed the unique cultural images and social connotations of the source text. Ultimately, at the communicative dimension, he effectively ensured that target-language readers could smoothly understand and appreciate the emotional tension and philosophical depth of the original work, achieving the fundamental goal of cross-cultural communication.

This series of adaptive selections and creative transformations not only proves the strong explanatory power of Eco-translatology theory in translation practice but also ultimately results in an outstanding translation that remains faithful to the spirit of the original while thriving within the English cultural ecosystem, providing a classic model for the international dissemination of Chinese literature and culture.

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