

## Original Paper

# On Translation Strategy of Culture-loaded Words from the Perspective of the Eco-translatology—A Case Study of the English Translation of *The Story of the Stone*

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### **Abstract**

*Culture-loaded words serve as vital carriers of cultural meaning and pose significant challenges in literary translation. This study investigates the English translation of *The Story of the Stone* by David Hawkes through the lens of Eco-translatology, focusing on the translation strategies employed for rendering culture-loaded terms. Guided by the three-dimensional transformation model—comprising linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions—the paper examines how Hawkes skillfully balances fidelity to the source text with adaptation to the target cultural context. Through detailed textual analysis, it reveals his flexible use of strategies such as transliteration, literal translation, free translation, annotation and transcreation. These choices reflect an ecological approach to translation, where the translator mediates between the source and target environments to achieve optimal communicative effect. This research deepens our understanding of the ecological nature of translation practice and offers valuable insights into the cross-cultural transmission of Chinese classical literature.*

### **Keywords**

*The Eco-translatology, Culture-loaded words, *The Story of the Stone*, Translation strategy*

## **1. Introduction**

The 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China and the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee laid out strategic plans for building a culturally strong nation. As a cornerstone of Chinese-style modernization and a key component in the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, cultural development has been given unprecedented importance. General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized the need to stay committed to the strategic goal of building China into a cultural power by 2035. Rooted in the profound heritage of Chinese civilization, the goal is to continuously cultivate a socialist culture with

Chinese characteristics that possesses strong ideological guidance, spiritual cohesion, and global influence.

In an era of globalization, previously isolated individuals, cultures, systems, and belief systems have entered a shared space of mutual interaction (Jin Huimin, 2019). Amid this context of cultural symbiosis, both cultural self-awareness and the consciousness of a shared human destiny are gaining strength. As a cultural masterpiece, *The Story of the Stone* stands as a monumental expression of Chinese civilization. It serves as a compendium of Chinese culture, encompassing rich depictions of history, social customs, moral values, religious beliefs, family dynamics, daily life, emotional experience, and artistic achievements, including opera, music, calligraphy, painting, garden aesthetics, and traditional architecture. The values, wisdom, aesthetics, and spirit embedded in the text have become deeply integrated into the Chinese cultural psyche, offering readers an enduring sense of artistic beauty and profound cultural meaning that transcends time.

In the 1970s, Penguin Books UK commissioned the renowned British sinologist and Hongloulou scholar David Hawkes (1923-2009) to translate the novel for its Penguin Classics series. His translation became the first complete English version of *The Story of the Stone* published in the Anglophone world. Translation, as Baker (2001) notes, plays a crucial role in facilitating the global circulation of culture. As one of the most celebrated works in Chinese classical literature, *The Story of the Stone* has attracted widespread attention from translators in both China and abroad, resulting in multiple English renditions. Among these, David Hawkes's version stands out for its fidelity to the original's literary style and its insightful treatment of culture-loaded expressions. His translation not only captures the linguistic essence of the source text but also conveys its rich cultural context in a way that is accessible and engaging for English-speaking audiences.

Through literature review, the author found that research on the translation of culture-loaded words has covered diverse domains such as classical literary translation, fashion terminology, film subtitling, advertising, and news translation (Wang Jing, 2024 & Huang Zhonglian, 2021). These studies, however, primarily rely on conventional translation theories such as functional equivalence, domestication and foreignization, and Skopos theory. To date, there has been little systematic research on the translation of culture-loaded terms in *The Story of the Stone* from the perspective of Eco-translatology. As an emerging theoretical framework, Eco-translatology emphasizes the dynamic interaction between the translator, the text, and the translational eco-environment. This paper adopts the theoretical framework of Eco-translatology and focuses on David Hawkes's translation of *The Story of the Stone*. By analyzing typical examples of culture-loaded word translation, it aims to identify common strategies employed and summarize prevailing methods. This study seeks to provide theoretical and practical insights for the English translation of Chinese classical literature and for advancing the global dissemination of Chinese culture.

## 2. The Eco-translatology

In 1973, Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess laid the groundwork for eco-philosophical inquiry with his formulation of “Deep Ecology,” introducing ecological perspectives into the domains of philosophy and ethics. Building on this trajectory, American eco-philosopher David Griffin proposed the notion of “ecological existence” in 1995, catalyzing the expansion of ecological thinking across academic disciplines. As the ecological paradigm gained interdisciplinary relevance, translation studies began to incorporate ecological concepts to reinterpret the nature, purpose, and practice of translation. The ecological perspective emerged not merely as a metaphor but as a framework rooted in systemic integration across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions.

Eco-translatology, conceptualized by Professor Hu Gengshen (2024) of Tsinghua University, is a pioneering approach that fuses ecological principles with translation theory. This paradigm is founded upon three core ideas: translation as the transplantation of texts, translation as adaptive selection, and translation as a process aimed at achieving ecological balance. A defining feature of Eco-translatology is its translator-centered orientation (Hu Gengshen, 2020)). The translator is not viewed as an omnipotent authority but as a dynamic mediator who plays a leading role in balancing the relationship between the source and target texts. Their responsibility lies in maintaining harmony within the translational ecosystem by making informed, context-sensitive choices.

The metaphor of “text transplantation” conveys the idea that the vitality of a translated text is contingent upon its integration into a new ecological environment. In the pre-transplantation phase, emphasis is placed on assessing the adaptability of the source text to the target ecosystem. During transplantation, the translator maps the source language’s ecological features—encompassing linguistic norms, cultural references, social values, and communicative functions—onto the target environment, applying adaptive transformations where necessary. Following transplantation, the translated text ideally becomes naturalized, thriving within its new context and contributing to ongoing intercultural dialogue.

Within this framework, translation is understood as a microcosmic activity that mirrors and interacts with the broader macrocosm of nature and society. This metaphorical alignment enables the elements involved in the translation process to coexist and flourish, fostering a mutually enriching and sustainable translation ecology. Ultimately, Eco-translatology envisions a state in which the act of translation contributes to the harmonious integration of humanity and nature—a vision of “unity through translation” rooted in ecological balance (Liu Junping, 2022).

Therefore, the ethical perspective of Eco-translatology highlights the translator’s ecological responsibility and ethical awareness. It encourages translators to reconsider the relationship between humans, nature, and society, fostering ecological consciousness while moving beyond ethnocentrism and anthropocentrism. Eco-translatology emphasizes adaptive and selective transformation across three dimensions: linguistic, cultural, and communicative. Linguistically, translators make appropriate choices in vocabulary, syntax, and discourse. Culturally, they must be sensitive to cultural differences and avoid misrepresenting the source culture. Communicatively, the focus is on conveying the intended meaning

of the source text accurately and effectively in the target language.

### 3. Culture-loaded Words

#### 3.1 Definition of Culture-loaded Words

The term culture-loaded terms was first introduced by Professor Xu Guozhang in 1980 in his article *Culturally Loaded Words and English Language Teaching*, published in *Modern Chinese*. As defined by the China Social Science Library, culture-loaded terms—also referred to as lexical gaps—encompass words, phrases, and idiomatic expressions that reflect culturally specific concepts unique to a particular society. These terms encapsulate the distinctive customs, values, and ways of life that have evolved over time within a given cultural group. They serve not only as linguistic representations of cultural identity but also as direct reflections of a people's historical experience and worldview.

Scholars have referred to culture-loaded terms using various terms, including culture-specific items (Aixelá, 1996), culture-specific concepts (Baker, 2001), and lexical gaps. The concept of culture-specific items proposed by Spanish translator and theorist Javier Franco Aixelá in his study of Spanish translations of American detective fiction, identified eleven translation strategies for handling such items. He defined culture-specific items as elements that, due to cultural or ideological differences, may pose comprehension challenges for target readers, even experts within the receiving culture.

As Chinese scholars Wang Kefei and Wang Yingchong (2016) observe, the primary difficulty in translating Chinese culture-specific vocabulary lies not in explanation but in achieving a balance between semantic accuracy and cultural fidelity. Culture-loaded terms are rich in cultural significance and deeply rooted in their sociocultural contexts. Their meanings often lack direct equivalents in the target language, making it challenging to preserve both the literal and cultural content in translation. Ensuring that the translated version adheres to the norms of the target language while accurately conveying the original's cultural essence is key to enabling target readers to engage with and appreciate the complex cultural fabric woven into *The Story of the Stone*. As such, studying culture-loaded terms plays a vital role in enhancing cross-cultural literary understanding and intercultural communication.

#### 3.2 Classification of Culture-loaded Words

In his 1945 article *Linguistics and Ethnology in Translation-Problems*, Eugene Nida (1993) introduced a foundational framework for understanding culture in the context of translation, categorizing it into five key domains: ecological culture, material culture, social culture, religious culture, and linguistic culture. Building upon this, Peter Newmark offered a more nuanced classification, identifying five major categories of cultural elements relevant to translation: (1) Ecological culture – encompassing natural phenomena such as animals, plants, local climate (e.g., wind), geographic features like mountains, plains, and ice; (2) Material culture – including man-made artifacts such as cuisine, clothing, shelter, transportation, and modes of communication; (3) Social culture – referring to everyday practices related to work, recreation, and social interactions; (4) Institutions, customs, and belief systems – involving political, social, legal, religious, and artistic structures and ideologies; (5) Gestures and habits – covering

culturally specific body language, behavioral patterns, and everyday conventions.

Hawkes's translation of *The Story of the Stone* showcases a nuanced handling of culture-loaded terms across the five cultural categories identified by Newmark (1988). In terms of ecological culture, references such as "cicadas" (for "蝉") evoke traditional Chinese associations with nature and seasonal cycles. For material culture, items like "vermilion carriage with oiled-paper windows" (from "油壁车") capture the tangible textures of Qing-dynasty life. In the category of social culture, Hawkes retains culturally specific naming conventions, such as "Second Sister You" (尤二姐), which subtly convey familial rank and societal roles. Under customs, institutions, and ideologies, his use of "Taoist priest" for "道士" effectively introduces religious and philosophical systems central to Chinese tradition. Regarding gestures and habits, expressions like "kowtow" preserve the embodied rituals of reverence and obedience. These translations reflect Hawkes's translatorial sensitivity and strategic balance between cultural fidelity and target-language accessibility, allowing non-Chinese readers to grasp the rich societal and spiritual dimensions embedded in the novel.

#### 4. On Translation of Culture-loaded Words in *The Story of the Stone* from the Perspective of the Eco-translatology

##### 4.1 Translation of Culture-loaded Words in the Linguistic Dimension

Within the framework of Eco-translatology, the linguistic dimension emphasizes the translator's adaptive and selective choices in vocabulary, syntax, and discourse structure, with the goal of achieving both textual coherence and ecological appropriateness in the target language environment. When translating culturally loaded terms, it is essential for the translator to carefully examine their linguistic forms and render them appropriately in the target language. This involves not only conveying the literal meaning but also reproducing the underlying cultural connotations, thereby enabling target readers to grasp both the linguistic features and the deeper significance of these expressions.

##### 4.1.1 Transliteration

Transliteration refers to the process or result of using one writing system (such as the Latin alphabet) to represent the characters of another writing system (such as Chinese characters) (Liu Xingfeng, 2025). Transliteration plays a crucial role in the expansion of human knowledge, the representation of information, cross-linguistic writing, intercultural communication, and the construction of discourse systems. Whether in traditional translation practices or in translation activities in the age of artificial intelligence, transliteration holds an irreplaceable and uniquely important position.

**Example 1:** 宝玉看罢，因笑道：“这个妹妹我曾见过的。”

**Translation:** Having completed his survey, Bao-yu gave a laugh. "I have seen this cousin before."

The transformation of the translation of cultural-loaded words from alternative translation to transliteration essentially represents the change in the translation concept of lexicographers from domestication to foreignization (Zhu Weifang, 2023). In this example, the name "宝玉" is rendered as "Bao-yu" through transliteration rather than being translated semantically as "Precious Jade" or

“Exquisite Jade.” This translation choice reflects a deliberate strategy by Hawkes to preserve the phonological and cultural identity of the character, rather than reducing it to a literal meaning that might distort its deeper symbolic significance. From the perspective of Eco-translatology, this aligns with adaptive selection in the linguistic dimension, maintaining the original sound while embedding the term in a new linguistic ecosystem.

**Example 2:** . . . . . 现在应天府案下审理。

**Translation:** The case was at present under investigation by the Ying-tian-fu yamen.

In this example, the culture-loaded word “应天府” is transliterated as “Ying-tian-fu”, preserving its original phonological structure rather than rendering it into a semantic equivalent such as “Capital Prefecture.” This approach demonstrates a transliteration strategy rooted in the linguistic dimension of Eco-translatology. The translator’s choice reflects an effort to maintain the sound, rhythm, and formal identity of the source term, thereby retaining its cultural distinctiveness in the target language. Within the linguistic dimension, this form of adaptive selection highlights the translator’s sensitivity to the phonetic features and naming conventions of classical Chinese, ensuring that the translation remains faithful not only in content but also in form. By presenting “Ying-tian-fu” without cultural simplification or localization, the translator creates a bridge that allows target readers to access the source culture through its original linguistic expressions. This enhances the text’s authenticity, and ensures that the translated work remains ecologically aligned with its source.

#### 4.1.2 Literal Translation

Literal translation refers to a method in which, when conditions of the target language allow, the translation retains not only the content of the original text but also its form—particularly metaphors, imagery, and elements of national or regional cultural color. In *The Story of the Stone*, Hawkes frequently adopted this strategy in order to achieve fidelity to the original text and to preserve its rich cultural and aesthetic features.

**Example 1:** 宝钗道：“有。这也是那癞头和尚说下的，叫作‘冷香丸’。”

**Translation:** “Yes,” said Bao-chai. “The monk said the pills are called ‘Cold Fragrance Pills’.”

This example illustrates the use of literal translation in the linguistic dimension of Eco-translatology. The term “冷香丸” is a culturally loaded expression referring to a traditional Chinese herbal remedy with both medical and symbolic connotations. Hawkes preserves the term’s original syntactic structure and imagery by translating it as “Cold Fragrance Pills.” This choice reflects a strong commitment to linguistic fidelity, enabling the translated text to retain its poetic resonance and cultural originality. Although the exact composition and cultural context of the medicine may not be immediately understood by target readers, the translator’s decision to use literal translation fosters a sense of authenticity and invites curiosity. It also captures the refined, mysterious, and somewhat ritualistic atmosphere surrounding Bao-chai’s character. By maintaining the lexical features of the source text, Hawkes achieves a subtle ecological balance that respects the linguistic form while leaving room for intercultural interpretation and discovery.

## 4.2 Translation of Culture-loaded Words in the Cultural Dimension

According to Eco-translatology, adaptive selection and transformation in the cultural dimension requires the translator to focus on the transmission and interpretation of cultural connotations between the source and target languages during the translation process. Translators are expected to avoid misinterpreting the original text from the standpoint of the target culture. This involves, on the one hand, recognizing the inherent differences between the source and target cultures in terms of their nature and content, and on the other hand, adapting to the broader cultural system to which the language belongs. In other words, when translating culturally loaded terms, the translator must carefully handle the cultural information embedded in the source text, remaining attentive to cultural distinctions between Chinese and English. This helps prevent the distortion of the original meaning that may arise from imposing the cultural framework of the target language onto the source text.

### 4.2.1 Free Translation

Free translation refers to rendering the general meaning of the source text without translating it word-for-word, in contrast to literal translation. It is often employed when translating sentences, phrases, or larger semantic units, particularly in situations where there are significant cultural differences between the source and target languages. In translating many culturally loaded expressions in *The Story of the Stone*, the translator frequently adopted a free translation approach. This strategy involves conveying the intended meaning of the original text in a way that is accessible to the target audience, based on a deep understanding of its cultural implications. By doing so, the translation minimizes potential cultural misunderstandings and facilitates effective cross-cultural communication and cultural transmission.

**Example 1:** 宝钗笑道：“虽是取笑儿，却也是真话。你放心，我在这里一日，我与你消遣一日。你有什么委屈烦难，只管告诉我，我能解的，自然替你解一日。”

**Translation:** “Perhaps,” said Bao-chai, smiling. “But it’s true, all the same. However, don’t you worry: as long as I’m here, I promise to do my best to make it easier for you. If you will promise always to let me know when anything is bothering you, I will promise to deal with it if it is in my power to do so.”

In this example, the term “消遣” is a culturally loaded expression that embodies traditional Chinese notions of leisure, emotional comfort, and interpersonal care. Rather than translating it literally as “to pass time” or “to amuse,” Hawkes renders it through free translation, interpreting the speaker’s intention to offer emotional support and companionship. His choice—“make it easier for you”—transcends surface-level meaning to capture the underlying cultural and relational values embedded in the dialogue. From the perspective of Eco-translatology’s cultural dimension, this represents an adaptive and selective transformation that aligns the source culture with the cognitive and emotional expectations of the target audience. Free translation, in this context, helps bridge cultural gaps by conveying not just linguistic content but the deeper interpersonal ethos behind it. Hawkes’s rendering thus preserves the ecological balance between the original text’s cultural specificity and the target audience’s receptivity, enabling effective cross-cultural communication while maintaining the authenticity of character dynamics and traditional values.

#### 4.2.2 Annotation

Annotation is a translation strategy that not only aims to preserve the semantic and stylistic integrity of the source text but also functions as a tool for clarification and elaboration. In the context of translating culturally loaded terms, annotation plays a particularly important role by providing the necessary background information and cultural context that may be unfamiliar to target language readers. Through concise explanatory notes, the translator bridges cultural gaps and enhances the reader's understanding of specific terms that carry deep cultural significance. By employing annotation, translators contribute to the accurate transmission and interpretation of Chinese cultural elements, thereby promoting intercultural communication and fostering appreciation for the richness of Chinese traditions.

**Example 1:** 石头笑答道: “我师何太痴耶!”

**Translation:** “Come, your reverence,” said the stone (for Vanitas had been correct in assuming that it could speak) “must you be so obtuse?”

In this example, the culturally loaded phrase “我师何太痴耶” includes a direct address to a Buddhist figure associated with philosophical notions of emptiness. The use of “Vanitas” here is not a mere name but a transliterated and adapted reference to the School of Emptiness, a term deeply rooted in Chinese Buddhist philosophy. Since this concept has no direct equivalent in English culture, the translator adds a brief parenthetical annotation to clarify narrative logic and cultural context. This strategy reflects an adaptive transformation in the cultural dimension of Eco-translatology, where annotation is used to preserve cultural specificity while enhancing comprehensibility for the target audience. Through this method, the translator helps readers navigate unfamiliar philosophical and religious concepts without oversimplifying or domesticating them, maintaining both the cultural integrity and narrative continuity of the original text.

#### 4.3 Translation of Culture-Loaded Words in the Communicative Dimension

**Example 1:** 满纸荒唐言，一把辛酸泪。都云作者痴，谁解其中味!

**Translation:** Pages full of idle word. Penned with hot and bitter tears: All men call the author fool; None his secret message hears.

**Example 2:** 此系身前身后事，倩谁记去作奇传?

**Translation:** My life in both worlds on this stone is writ: Pray who will copy out and publish it?

Transcreation refers to the creative adaptation of source language content into the target language while preserving the intended meaning, style, and tone of the original text. Unlike traditional translation, which primarily emphasizes fidelity to the original, transcreation is a hybrid process that combines translation with content creation, making it highly imaginative and flexible. When translating culturally loaded terms, translators often employ this strategy to convey cultural nuances more effectively and to resonate with the target audience.

In Example 1, “荒唐言” is not mechanically translated as “absurd words” but as “idle words,” a softer yet equally dismissive expression that fits the rhythm and tone of the English poem. Similarly, “谁解其中味” is adapted to “None his secret message hears,” which preserves the philosophical reflection and



rhetorical lament of the original, while also adapting naturally to English poetic conventions. Through such carefully crafted choices, Hawkes demonstrates the essence of transcreation: he transforms not just the meaning, but also the aesthetic and emotional experience of the original text for an English-speaking audience.

In Example 2, culture-loaded expression “身前身后事” referring to one’s life before and after death—a concept rich in traditional Chinese views on fate, legacy, and metaphysical continuity. Hawkes translates this as: “My life in both worlds on this stone is writ: Pray who will copy out and publish it?” This rendering exemplifies transcreation as an adaptive strategy within the communicative dimension of Eco-translatology. Rather than offering a literal translation, the translator reshapes the line into a rhythmic, poetic English couplet that captures the original’s rhetorical tone and metaphysical inquiry. By creatively reconstructing both the meaning and form, Hawkes ensures that the philosophical depth and narrative voice resonate with the target audience. This approach prioritizes communicative effectiveness, allowing the intended emotional and reflective impact to be preserved across cultural boundaries, while maintaining the overall aesthetic and spiritual tenor of the original text.

## 5. Conclusion

Culture-loaded words play a pivotal role as vessels of cultural heritage and meaning within literary works, presenting significant challenges for translators aiming to faithfully convey their richness across linguistic boundaries. This study, through the lens of Eco-translatology, analyzed David Hawkes’ translation strategies in the English rendition of *The Story of the Stone*. By applying the three-dimensional transformation framework—covering linguistic, cultural, and communicative aspects—it reveals how Hawkes adeptly negotiates between preserving the source text’s cultural depth and ensuring accessibility for the target audience. This ecological perspective not only promotes effective intercultural communication but also deepens readers’ appreciation of Chinese classical literature. Ultimately, this paper highlights the indispensable role of culturally nuanced strategies in translating culture-loaded words and enriches our understanding of translation as a complex, adaptive ecological process.

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