

Original Paper

C-E Translation of Culture-loaded Words from the Perspective of Cross-cultural Communication: Taking *A Dream of Red Mansions* as Examples

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Abstract

A Dream of Red Mansions, one of the four great classical novels in China, is world-renowned. From a cross-cultural perspective, this paper examines the translation of culture-loaded terms from Chinese into English, taking the English translations of A Dream of Red Mansions by David Hawkes and by Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang as examples. The large number of culture-loaded words contained in it pose major challenges and difficulties in the translation work. Through a literature review, this paper sorts out cross-cultural communication and translation theories, and elaborates on the definition and classification of culture-loaded words. By analyzing examples of the translation of ecological, linguistic, religious, material, and social culture-loaded words in A Dream of Red Mansions, it examines the effects of different translation strategies adopted by Hawkes and Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang.

Keywords

Cross-cultural communication, Culture-loaded words, A Dream of Red Mansions, Translation strategies

1. Introduction

In an era of increasing globalization, cross-cultural communication has become an integral part of our daily lives. As different cultures interact more frequently, language, as a crucial medium of communication, plays a vital role in facilitating mutual understanding. Among various language elements, culture-loaded words are particularly significant. These words carry the unique cultural connotations, values, beliefs, and historical heritages of a particular culture.

Culture-loaded words are everywhere in literary works, which are not only a crystallization of a nation's language art but also a carrier of its profound cultural traditions. One of the most renowned Chinese literary masterpieces, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, is a prime example. This classic novel, written by Cao Xueqin, provides a panoramic view of Chinese feudal society in the 18th century, covering aspects such as family ethics, social hierarchies, traditional customs, and aesthetic concepts. It is replete with a vast number of culture-loaded words that are deeply rooted in Chinese culture.

However, when translating *A Dream of Red Mansions* or any other works rich in culture-loaded words from Chinese to English, numerous challenges arise. The cultural and linguistic differences between Chinese and English, such as different ways of thinking, value systems, and language structures, often make it difficult to accurately convey the original meaning and cultural flavor of these words. Many translation theories and strategies have been proposed to address the translation of culture-loaded words. However, there are not many studies from the perspective of cross-cultural communication. Cross-cultural communication emphasizes the successful transfer of cultural information and the achievement of mutual understanding between different cultures. Therefore, studying the C-E translation of culture-loaded words in *A Dream of Red Mansions* from this perspective may provide relatively new insights.

2. Literature Review

The term "Cross-cultural communication" first appeared in E. T. Hall's famous book *Silent Language* (1959). Early scholars interpreted cross-cultural communication as a unique phenomenon that is different from other communication. This definition presumes that a boundary between cultures is equated with a political boundary between countries or nations. Hall and Whyte (1960) viewed it as the actual communication process between representatives of different cultures. For them, especially for Hall, cross-cultural communication needs a special attention and treatment that other kinds of communication do not require. Ellingworth, likewise, contended that "cross-cultural communication is a unique dimension of communication which requires special labeling, attention, methodology, and instruction" (1977, p. 101). Samovar and Porter (2006) pointed out that cross-cultural communication is an international event where participants come from widely diverse geographic areas that are separated and isolated.

Susan Bassnett (1990) redefined translation studies in *Translation, History and Culture*. She posited that translation is more of a cross-cultural communication activity than a mere language encoding-decoding process; it's essentially cross-cultural information transmission. Thus, translation should aim for target text functional equivalence, beyond source text description, to foster cross-cultural communication. In *Translation Studies*, Bassnett further offered new perspectives for translation studies from the cultural school, such as emphasizing text historical and cultural backgrounds, understanding text manipulation complexity, and factors influencing translators' strategies (2004, p. 32). In the landmark essay *The Translator's Invisibility* (2004), Lawrence Venuti

emphasized the translator's role. He argued that the translator, as a cultural mediator, is crucial in representing other cultures, and intercultural relations span literary and political aspects. Venuti proposed two translation strategies: domestication and foreignization. Translators can either erase foreign text alterity to suit readers' expectations or preserve it. Venuti (1998) also criticized traditional translation's ethnocentric violence. He advocated for foreignization against domestication's imperial and colonial-like tendencies. Foreignizing translation challenges the target culture's dominant discourses, restrains unequal cultural exchanges, and highlights foreign text differences. It also liberates the translator from invisibility. Douglas Robinson (2007, p. 116) defined domestication as an assimilative translation aligning source texts with target cultural and linguistic values. This strategy prioritizes dominated culture readers and favors fluent translations minimizing foreignness. Nida's "functional equivalence" (1993) theory reflects domestication's "ethnocentric violence". Overall, post-"culture turn" translation theories often support Venuti's foreignization. Some postcolonial translation theories concur. They avoid other culture assimilation and seek to restore the colonized's voice, advocating translations highlighting the original's foreignness through various means, like literalism or creating a "third space" (Bhabha, 1994). Notably, "domestication and foreignization" differ from "literal and free translation", which were popular before the "culture turn". Given culture's key role in cross-cultural communication, translation is more complex than just language work. Since Venuti's proposal, domestication and foreignization, covering language and culture, have become common translation strategies.

In China, numerous studies on Chinese-English translation have been conducted, mostly empirical. Chinese scholars such as Jiang Mei (2014), Zhan and Dong (2010) explored business translation from a cross-cultural communication perspective, summarizing principles and techniques. In literature, Liu Miqing (2007) stated that the goal of cultural translation is to convey culture-connoted information. Sun Yifeng (2012) noted the unsatisfactory state of Chinese-English translation due to underestimated cultural discrepancies and called for transcending cultural nationalism. Chen Gang (2006), through examples from *The Deer and the Cauldron's* English translation, showed that the domestication strategy remains dominant. Jiang Qiuxia et al. (2009), analyzing two English versions of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, found that translators' ideologies and cultural awareness, social backgrounds, and patrons' ideologies influence translation strategies. Xue Yi (2016) analyzed the English translation of heterogeneous culture, highlighting cultural differences as an obstacle and stressing the importance of cross-cultural consciousness.

3. Culture-Loaded Words and Expressions

Culture-loaded words embody unique cultural information, serving as linguistic carriers of a community's history, customs, and values. Their study is vital for cross-cultural communication and translation, as they often lack direct equivalents in target languages, posing challenges for meaning transfer. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Culture-loaded words abound, reflecting China's feudal culture

in depth. This section defines Culture-loaded words and categorizes them based on Nida's cultural typology to lay a theoretical foundation for subsequent analysis.

3.1 Definition

Generally, culture-loaded expressions, also known as "culture-bound expressions" or "culture-specific expressions," convey specific cultural information of a community. As they linguistically reveal a community's culture, including its history, customs, economy, politics, norms, values, beliefs, etc., studying them is of great importance. Many scholars, both domestic and international, have explored culture-loaded expressions from diverse perspectives.

Mona Baker (2000, p. 21) states that "the source language word may present a concept entirely unknown in the target culture. The concept in question may be abstract or concrete; it may relate to a type of food, a social custom, or a religious belief," defining these concepts as "culture-specific terms." The Spanish translation theorist and translator J.F. Aixela expounds on "culture-specific items" in *Culture-specific Items in Translation*. Zhang Nanfeng (2004) notes that Aixela defines these linguistic items as words or phrases in the source text with no equivalents in the target text, which makes it difficult to transfer the source items' function and meaning and hinders smooth cross-cultural communication.

Chinese scholars have also conducted extensive research on this special linguistic phenomenon. For instance, Fang Mengzhi (2003) and Jin Huikang (2004) share the view that culture-loaded words and expressions reflect certain aspects of a language community's culture. These words, existing in every culture, often carry both referential and connotative meanings. Hu Wenzhong (1999) differentiates culture-loaded words from non-culture-loaded words linguistically, identifying the former as those directly or indirectly reflecting a national culture at the lexical level with unique cultural information. Liao Qiyi (2000) argues that culture-loaded words with cultural connotations mirror a nation's distinct way of life, having been accumulated and passed down throughout history and being unique to that nation.

In summary, culture-loaded expressions showcase the general characteristics that distinguish one culture from others. They mainly have two features. First, they are specific to a community, making it difficult to find exact equivalents in other cultures. Second, they carry profound cultural associations.

3.2 Categories

Many scholars on cultural translation studies have proposed classifications of culture-loaded words and expressions for thorough research. In this thesis, the author categorizes them into five types: ecological, material, religious, social and linguistic culture-loaded words and expressions. This classification is based on Nida's widely utilized classification of five types of culture belonging to a community (Nida, 2004).

4. Translation of Culture-Loaded Words and Expressions

Translating Culture-Loaded Words in *A Dream of Red Mansions* requires reconciling linguistic accuracy with cultural conveyance. This section examines five Culture-Loaded Words types: ecological, linguistic, religious, material, and social, through case studies, analyzing how translators balance cultural fidelity and reader accessibility.

4.1 Ecological Culture-Loaded Words and Expressions

Ecological culture reflects the natural geographical features of a region, such as climate, plants, and geological characteristics. Ecological culture-loaded words are terms derived from such cultures, and different ecological cultures exist under different ecological environments. Take the word “柳” as an example. In Chapter 3 of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, when describing Daiyu, the author wrote: When she moved, she seemed like a delicate willow swaying in the breeze. Regarding this, Hawkes translated “柳” as “willow shoots”, while Yang Xianyi and his wife Gladys Yang directly translated it as “willow”.

In fact, this sentence in the original work reflects that Lin Daiyu was weak and slender, just like a willow branch swaying in the wind. Hawkes’ translation can better convey Lin Daiyu’s slender figure. In the translation of Yang Xianyi and his wife, “willow” doesn’t seem to effectively reflect Lin Daiyu’s slenderness. Generally speaking, unless the wind is extremely strong, the trunk of a willow tree won’t be shaken; only its branches will sway in the wind. Additionally, willows represent different things in Chinese and Western cultural contexts. In the English cultural context, willows usually symbolize sorrow and death, while in the Chinese cultural context, willows typically symbolize a woman’s appearance and posture. Therefore, Hawkes’ translation here is more accessible for foreign readers to understand the characters in the novel, better conveys the artistic conception of the original work, and is more expressive.

4.2 Linguistic Culture-Loaded Words and Expressions

Linguistic culture-loaded words refer to those expressions, words, and idiomatic phrases that are rich in profound cultural connotations and distinct national characteristics. Language is the carrier of culture. It is not only a bridge for communication among different ethnic groups but also an important medium for showcasing the cultural characteristics of each ethnic group. In Chinese, there are a large number of language treasures such as allusions, four-character idioms, and proverbs, which together constitute the rich cultural connotations and unique national charm of the Chinese language.

Due to their unique semantic connotations and expressions, language culture-loaded words carry China’s long historical traditions and rich and colorful folk customs, becoming an important carrier to showcase the charm of Chinese culture.

When describing the image of Lin Daiyu, there is such a sentence in *A Dream of Red Mansions*: “She had more sensitivity than Bi Gan and was more delicate than Xi Shi in illness.” There are two allusions in this sentence, involving two historical figures, namely “比干” and “西施”. Regarding this, Hawkes translated them as “Bi Gan” and “Xi Shi”, while Yang Xianyi and his wife Gladys Yang translated them

as “Pikan” and “Hsi Shih”, and added two notes at the back of the text to explain Bi Gan and Xi Shi. Hawkes directly translated using modern Chinese pinyin without explaining these two allusions. Western readers may be completely confused, and such a treatment is obviously not conducive to the dissemination of ancient Chinese history and culture. Yang Xianyi and his wife first used the Wade-Giles romanization method and then added explanations of these two figures. This treatment method is conducive to Western readers’ understanding of Chinese culture and thus a better understanding of the images and character traits of the characters in the original work. At the level of cultural dissemination, Yang Xianyi and his wife’s translation of the culture-loaded words here is more appropriate.

4.3 Religious Culture-Loaded Words and Expressions

Religious culture-loaded words can reflect the religious beliefs and ideological concepts of people in a region. *A Dream of Red Mansions* contains many traditional religious ideas, including Buddhism, Taoism, etc. China and the West have different religious and cultural systems, and the differences in religious backgrounds make the translation of words with such cultures more difficult. For translators, it is quite challenging to accurately translate these words with profound cultural connotations into corresponding expressions in the context of Western languages and cultures.

Example 1: 王凤姐弄权铁槛寺, 秦鲸卿得趣馒头庵 (第十五回标题)

Hawkes translates: At Water-moon Priory Xi-feng finds how much profit may be procured by the abuse of power/And Qin Zhong discovers the pleasures that are to be had under the cover of darkness

Yang&Dai translate: Xifeng Abuses Her Power at Iron Threshold Temple; Qin Zhong Amuses Himself in Steamed-Bread Convent

The title of Chapter 15 of *A Dream of Red Mansions* involves Buddhist culture. Hawkes chose free translation, while Yang Xianyi and his wife Gladys Yang chose literal translation. Because the steamed buns made there were delicious, “水月庵” was also known as “馒头庵”. Hawkes deleted the translation of “铁槛寺” and adopted the method of omission. For “水月庵”, he used literal translation. At the same time, he summarized the main content of this chapter, which is conducive to readers’ understanding of the chapter’s theme. Yang Xianyi and his wife directly translated “铁槛寺” and “馒头庵” as Iron Threshold Temple and Steamed-Bread Convent. In conclusion, Hawkes’ translation is more flexible and more suitable for Western readers to understand. The translation of Yang Xianyi and his wife preserves Chinese culture, but at the same time, it is not conducive to Western readers’ understanding of these obscure Chinese cultural and religious terms.

4.4 Material Culture-Loaded Words and Expressions

Material culture-loaded words are derived from various items that people come into contact with in their lives. For example, clothing (clothing culture-loaded words), food (diet culture-loaded words), housing (architecture culture-loaded words), transportation (transportation culture-loaded words), and so on. Due to different lifestyles and social structures, there are significant differences in material culture between Chinese and Western cultures. Since language is the carrier of culture, such differences

are reflected in language. Under different cultural backgrounds, people often have very different views on the same thing. The implications represented by various items are inconsistent, or even at two extremes, in the two cultural environments. There are a large number of material culture-loaded words in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. During the translation process, translators should have a correct understanding of the culture-loaded words in the original work and thus adopt appropriate translation strategies.

Example 2: 项上带着赤金盘螭瓔珞圈……（摘选自第三回）

Hawkes translates: Her necklet was of red gold in the form of a coiling dragon...

Yang&Dai translate: Her necklet, of red gold, was in the form of a coiled dragon studded with gems...

In Example 2, Hawkes omitted the translation of “瓔珞圈”. At the top of the yingluo, there is often a delicate metal collar decorated. Around the collar hang a dazzling array of precious jewels and jades, making it extremely magnificent. He failed to depict the feature that the yingluo collar is adorned with precious jewels and jades. Compared with Hawkes’ translation, the translation of Yang Xianyi and his wife has the component of “studded with gems”, that is, it adds the meaning of “inlaid with gems”, so the translation is more complete and more faithful to the original text. “赤金” refers to pure gold. However, both translations adopted literal translation and translated “赤金” as “red gold”, which is inaccurate. “Red gold” more often refers to an alloy of gold and copper. The surface of this alloy appears red or pink depending on the amount of copper doped. “盘螭” means two hornless dragons coiled around the collar. Here, both translations simply translated it as “dragon”. There are significant differences between the images of dragons in Chinese and Western cultures. In the West, the “dragon” is an evil monster and has a negative image. In China, the dragon is the totem of the nation, with sacred symbolic meanings, representing authority and honor, and has a positive image. Therefore, the translator should take into account the Western readers’ understanding of the “dragon” here and handle the translation more meticulously. Translating “螭” simply as “dragon” is a bit general and fails to showcase the luxury of this ornament.

4.5 Social Culture-Loaded Words and Expressions

A Dream of Red Mansions is hailed as an encyclopedia of Chinese feudal society. It covers aspects such as absolute monarchy, land, the imperial examination system, marriage, slavery, and the hierarchical system. Moreover, it reflects social ruling ideologies and moral concepts like Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism of the Cheng-Zhu School, involving a large number of social culture-loaded words. Throughout the long history, different societies have different ways of life, traditional customs, values, and aesthetics. These elements even hold a dominant position in Chinese works and are a characteristic of Chinese works (Huang Shimei et al., 2023). Social culture-loaded words are related to aspects such as social structure, relationships, norms, and phenomena, including political systems, customs, family relationships, social order, social appellations, etc. (Guan Bangdi et al., 2024).

Regarding the term “通房大丫头”, Hawkes adopted free translation and used the method of domestication. The word “confidante” skillfully depicts the deep emotional bond between Wang Xifeng

and Ping'er. They are more like bosom friends with profound affection, not merely restricted to the master-servant relationship. Yang Xianyi and his wife Gladys Yang adopted literal translation and used the foreignizing translation strategy. "become Jia Lian's concubine" directly conveys the meaning of "通房". The word "dowry" (陪嫁) objectifies Ping'er, a living person, and conveys the cannibalistic aspect of the feudal society as well as the strict concept of superiority and inferiority and hierarchical order. From the perspective of cultural transmission, such a treatment is more accurate.

5. Conclusion

An excellent literary translation is not a replication of the original work but an understanding and re-creation of it. While remaining faithful to the original, it also involves a certain degree of innovation. Combining cross-cultural communication theory, when translating classic cultural works, culture-loaded words often become the focus and difficulty in the translation process, greatly influencing the entire translation. If translators cannot handle culture-loaded words correctly, it will be difficult to convey the essence of the culture and achieve the purpose of cross-cultural communication. The translations of *A Dream of Red Mansions* by Hawkes and Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang demonstrate different attempts by the translators, each with its own merits. They may adopt foreignizing strategies such as literal translation, or domesticating strategies such as free translation. Sometimes they omit certain translations, and sometimes they carry out explanatory translations. Thus, it can be seen that translators need to respond flexibly and adopt appropriate techniques. The English translation of culture-loaded words shoulders the lofty mission of transmitting Chinese traditional culture to the world. Translators should apply appropriate translation strategies, vividly tell Chinese stories, and more widely spread Chinese culture to enhance cultural confidence.

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