

Original Paper

Problems in the English Translation of Folk Classics from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication and Possible Solutions

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Abstract

Folk classics concentrate a nation's collective memory and aesthetic temperament, and their English translation is itself an important medium of cross-cultural communication. For cross-cultural communication, translating a folk classic is not a simple transfer between languages; it also involves conveying cultural meaning, reconstructing historical context and reconciling aesthetic form. This paper looks into the reasons why English translations of folk classics often fall short, examines how cultural difference, aesthetic disparity and contextual complexity affect the comprehension and reception of a translated text, and proposes remedies through translation strategy, translator competence and multimodal dissemination. It argues that a successful English translation of a folk classic should serve two goals at once, cultural preservation and effective communication, since only then can such a text travel into other cultures. Both the analysis and the proposed remedies are grounded in specific points of translation, namely culture-loaded words, rhetorical forms and historical context, so as to show how source-cultural information may be retained, explained and compensated for in English.

Keywords

English translation, cross-cultural communication, folk classics

Introduction

Folk classics are the fruit of a nation's traditions and collective wisdom, and they hold a distinctive place in the cultural system of any society. Folk tales, proverbs, ballads and legends are the texts that most densely carry the values, beliefs and aesthetic sensibilities a community hands down from one generation to the next. To put such works into English is not merely to replace source-language words with English expressions; it is also to open, through the translated text, a point of entry for readers of another culture

into the spiritual world of a civilization. As cross-cultural exchange has increased, the translation of folk classics has taken on a new significance. It is no longer confined to linguistic conversion and translational technique, but has become an important element in how overseas readers form their picture of a country's cultural image and values. Cross-cultural communication, as the term is used here, is therefore not a macro-level discussion detached from the translated text; it takes concrete translational operations, such as word choice, syntactic recasting, cultural annotation and contextual compensation, as its basic point of departure.

1. Basic Requirements for the English Translation of Folk Classics from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication

1.1 Cultural Identity and National Character in Folk Literature

What sets folk classics apart from other literary works is that they are rooted deep in the cultural identity of a particular community. Folk tales, proverbs, ballads and epic narratives took shape over a long period under the shared beliefs, customs and values of that community. When such texts are translated into another language, the translator's first task is to preserve the recognizable cultural features of the original, rather than to weaken them in order to accommodate target-language conventions. Cultural authenticity in English translation does not mean the word-for-word reproduction of every foreign detail; it means finding an English mode of expression that conveys cultural difference while remaining intelligible, so that readers can actually feel that difference. Mythological figures in legends, ritual practices recorded in festival stories, and moral ideas embodied in animal fables all form part of the national cultural information the translation has to carry. From the standpoint of cross-cultural communication, cultural identity is not fixed: it is continually reshaped through contact with other cultural material. If cultural specificity is erased and the translation converges too closely on ordinary target-language usage, the text may be easier to accept, yet the very purpose of translating the folk classic is lost. If, on the other hand, the version foregrounds exotic flavor while supplying too little background, readers will simply fail to understand it. The key, then, lies in balancing cultural retention against intelligibility, presenting cultural difference fully while giving readers the clues they need. For the translator this balance comes down to specific wording choices concerning culture-specific names, ritual terms and value concepts: cultural difference must not be dissolved into generic English concepts, nor should unfamiliar forms be kept without any route to comprehension.

1.2 Communicative Effect and Target-Reader Reception

One of the central aims of cross-cultural communication is to enable the target audience to understand accurately what the translation conveys and to respond emotionally in ways close to what the original author intended. Communicative effect here is not limited to linguistic accuracy; it also concerns the degree to which a translation provokes understanding and resonance in its new cultural setting. A folk classic may be rich in content and artistry in its source language, yet if the English version fails to engage readers through its word choice, cultural explanation or narrative presentation, leaving them indifferent,

puzzled or culturally alienated, the communicative aim has not been met. Reception can be examined at three levels: the surface level of linguistic accessibility, the middle level of cultural comprehensibility, and the deeper level of aesthetic pleasure. Translators need to know who their readers are, whether researchers in folk literature, general readers with an interest in world literature, or students meeting the text for the first time, and to adjust vocabulary difficulty, density of annotation and the overall translation plan accordingly. The same source content addressed to different audiences should therefore differ in lexical difficulty, annotation density and the amount of cultural explanation, so that audience positioning is realized in concrete translational choices.

2. Challenges in the English Translation of Folk Classics from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication

2.1 Culture-Loaded Words and Conceptual Gaps

The first difficulty in translating folk classics into English is that some culture-loaded words have no direct English counterpart. Folk texts frequently refer to local plants and animals, social customs, religious beliefs and historical figures, and because these concepts grew out of a particular cultural ecology, English often lacks an exact equivalent. Such cases may be described as conceptual or lexical gaps, for which a dictionary alone can hardly supply an adequate rendering. When a folk tale mentions a ritual object or a seasonal custom that English readers have never heard of, the translator has to choose among several options: transliteration with annotation, explanation in general terms, or replacement by a culturally analogous concept. Each choice carries a different meaning for cross-cultural communication. Transliteration preserves cultural distinctiveness but may add to the reader's burden; paraphrase aids reception but may weaken the original cultural marker; cultural substitution is easy to understand, yet it may alter the original sense and the boundaries of the culture. Translating culture-loaded words is therefore not a matter of hunting for an "equivalent". It requires combined choices among transliteration, literal translation, paraphrase and necessary annotation, together with an assessment of whether those choices have shifted the cultural boundaries of the source concept.

2.2 Aesthetic Content and Rhetorical Uncertainty

Folk classics do not only transmit information; they also carry a distinctive aesthetic value. The rhythm of folk songs, the parallel structures of proverbs, the imagery of ballads and the humor of anecdotes are the aesthetic features that make folk works engaging and memorable. Such aesthetic content is usually hard to reproduce fully in another language, since rhetorical and aesthetic form depends to a large extent on the language itself. English and Chinese differ in their phonological systems, sentence structures and modes of expression. Expressions that rely on sound patterns and syntax in the source language may be noticeably weakened once rendered into English. Folk literature often works through suggestion, using images to hint at meaning and convey feeling rather than stating it outright, and this makes the difficulty of transfer all the more acute. The openness of aesthetic meaning means that no single rendering is correct; translators must weigh alternatives that produce different aesthetic effects, and no translation can

fully reproduce the artistic appeal of the original. For target readers, the aesthetic associations of the source language are seldom activated naturally, so the information carried by rhyme, rhythm and figurative language tends to be lost in translation, tied as it is to the source language and its cultural system. Aesthetic problems must therefore be dealt with through concrete translational operations: where the original rhyme cannot be reproduced, the rhythmic relation may take priority; where a literal rendering of an image would obstruct understanding, syntactic adjustment or a brief explanation may keep the association pointing in the right direction.

2.3 Historical Context and Folk Knowledge Systems

Folk classics arose in particular historical periods and took shape within the corresponding folk knowledge systems. These systems include shared knowledge of social hierarchy, family structure, religious belief, the agricultural calendar and local history, knowledge that readers normally absorb without effort from their own surroundings. Such contextual knowledge rarely transfers directly into English and must be rebuilt in the course of translation, or supplied through paratexts such as notes and introductions. The problem is not simply whether readers know certain facts, but that they inhabit a different system for understanding interpersonal relations, social obligations and supernatural belief. A folk tale that presupposes some familiarity with fate, honor or popular sentiment will seem odd, even unreasonable, to English readers if the translation provides too little contextual reference. Translators must control how far contextual information is made explicit, giving readers the clues they need to follow the characters' actions and the cultural logic behind them. Too much explanation weakens the narrative quality of the story and pushes the translation toward ethnographic description, while too little creates a break in comprehension. Contextual reconstruction should therefore proceed alongside the translation itself: the main text should keep the narrative flowing, while information essential to understanding relationships, motives and belief is supplied through modest paraphrase, annotation or contextual compensation elsewhere in the text.

3. Problems and Countermeasures in the English Translation of Folk Classics from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication

3.1 Plural Strategies and Compensatory Measures

A handful of fixed methods will not suffice to resolve the problems outlined above. Different translation units within a text call for different treatment: in the same folk tale, cultural terms may be translated literally or transliterated, rhetorical forms adjusted functionally, and gaps in context filled with necessary explanation. Compensatory translation refers to making up, elsewhere in the target text, for information or formal effects unavoidably lost in cultural transfer, whether through semantic explanation, structural adjustment or contextual supplementation. Strategy should match the function of the text. A culture-specific name may be transliterated with a brief note at its first appearance and then used consistently, so that readers gradually become familiar with it. Where a rhetorical device cannot be reproduced directly, parallel structures in English can produce an approximate rhythmic effect, though

the actual sound pattern will differ. Proverbs and idioms are harder still: rather than resorting to an English idiom that brings unintended cultural connotations, a literal rendering with explanation serves cross-cultural communication better. Strategy must therefore remain flexible and never be bound to a single method; it should take account of varying contexts and, at different points in the text, choose solutions that balance cultural accuracy, English readability and communicative effect. In other words, strategy should be selected with reference to specific translation units: culture-loaded items at the lexical level, rhetoric and rhythm at the sentence level, and context and narrative coherence at the level of the whole text, so that communicative effect can be achieved through observable translational choices.

3.2 Translators' Cross-Cultural Competence and Field Knowledge

The quality of an English translation of folk classics depends on the translator's ability to work at the intersection of two cultures. Cross-cultural competence here is not the same as bilingual proficiency; it also includes knowledge of the source folk culture and its history, together with a grasp of target-language literary norms and reader expectations. Translators of folk classics need a sense of “fieldwork”, that is, an understanding of how folk texts actually function in the communities where they first circulated. Only then can they tell which elements are indispensable to the folk character of a work and which information may be condensed without altering the meaning. Such judgment also helps them anticipate the comprehension difficulties target readers are likely to meet and choose appropriate compensation in advance. This competence requires both linguistic training and sustained contact with folk literature and its cultural setting: reading original folk tales, proverbs and ballads, talking with specialists in folklore, and reflecting on what earlier translations have achieved and where they have failed in bridging cultures. In this sense the translator is both a linguistic mediator and a cross-cultural communicator, one who must turn source-language information into expression that target readers can understand. Because this process involves cultural interpretation as well as linguistic expression, translators need cultural self-awareness, vigilance about their own biases, recognition of how their cultural presuppositions may skew their judgments of a translation, and a willingness to seek feedback from readers and scholars in both cultures. This competence shows itself in practical decisions: which source expressions must retain their cultural otherness, which information needs explanation, and which rhetorical features can be compensated for by functionally similar forms in English.

3.3 Multimodal Translation and Cross-Cultural Channels

In the age of digital communication, English translations of folk classics are no longer restricted to the printed page. Multimodal translation can combine the English text with images, sound and other media, helping audiences from different cultural backgrounds understand both the folk classic and its cultural context. A folk tale, for example, may first be translated as English prose and then accompanied by images that reflect the visual culture of the source tradition; recordings of the original oral performance can preserve its rhythm and intonation. Material of this kind can also make up for contexts that a text-only translation cannot adequately present. Channels of cross-cultural communication have expanded as well, with folk classics circulating around the world through digital platforms, audiobooks,

animated adaptations and interactive websites. Translators no longer simply supply a fixed printed rendering; they may take part in designing how the translation is received by different audiences. Nor need the results of translation remain purely verbal: they can extend into a communicative system made up of sound, image and interactive media. When a folk classic enters a new culture by several routes at once, those routes reinforce one another. Readers may first meet a tale through animation and then turn to the English text, gaining a deeper understanding of its cultural meaning; a good translation, in turn, can become the basis for further adaptations. Solving the problems of translating folk classics therefore requires solid translational skill as well as reflection on how the translation should be presented within a context of cross-cultural communication. Multimodal material should serve the understanding of the translation rather than replace it, its function being to supplement the vocal, ritual and performative contexts that English prose cannot fully carry.

Conclusion

Seen from the perspective of cross-cultural communication, linguistic accuracy, cultural awareness and communicative effect in the English translation of folk classics cannot be separated. The basic aim is to preserve national cultural features while improving the intelligibility and acceptability of the translation in the target culture. The difficulties of cultural loading, aesthetic transfer and contextual reconstruction call for targeted strategies, which require translators to combine methods flexibly, to exercise stronger cross-cultural judgment and to make reasonable use of diverse communication channels. As cross-cultural exchange deepens and new media emerge, the translation of folk classics will change accordingly. What remains constant is the task of carrying the voice of folk culture into other languages and cultures through accurate, readable translation, so that readers of other cultural backgrounds can approach, understand and feel its cultural meaning. In this respect, the cross-cultural perspective is less a body of theory than a habit of thought: it reminds translators that the ultimate value of their work lies in building a bridge of cultural understanding, not merely in matching linguistic forms. The core of translating folk classics, then, remains the cross-cultural transformation of specific texts, a continual calibration, at the levels of vocabulary, rhetoric, context and media presentation, of what to retain, what to explain and how to compensate, so that cultural communication rests on a translation that is readable, intelligible and still faithful to the original.

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