

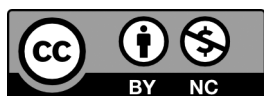
A Study on the Translation of Culture-Loaded Words from the Perspective of the “Going Global” of Chinese Culture

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Abstract: As pivotal elements of cultural transmission, Chinese culture-loaded words encapsulate rich historical and cultural connotations, profoundly manifesting the profound heritage of Chinese civilization. Confronted with the mission of international communication and cultural dissemination, translators must accord meticulous consideration to these culturally specific expressions, striving to accurately present the essence of traditional Chinese culture to global audiences, thereby effectively enhancing the global propagation and influence of Chinese culture. This study examines Yang Xianyi’s English translation of *The New Year’s Sacrifice* to explore translation strategies and methods for culture-loaded words under the framework of the “Going Global” Chinese Culture initiative, specifically analyzing material culture-loaded terms, social culture-loaded terms, and religious culture-loaded terms. The research aims to contribute modestly to scholarly discourse in this field.

Keywords: The “Going Global” of Chinese Culture; Culture-loaded Terms; *The New Year’s Sacrifice*



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1 Introduction

Language serves as a pivotal vehicle for cultural inheritance, with each ethnic language embodying its unique cultural essence. Translation, therefore, transcends mere linguistic conversion; it constitutes a dialogue and fusion between national cultures. This process is challenged not only by linguistic differences but also deeply constrained by cultural contexts. Sun Zhili (2000) emphasized that the greatest obstacle in translation often lies not in the language itself but in the deep cultural meanings conveyed through language. Culture-loaded terms, as distinctive markers of national culture, encapsulate rich cultural symbolism and represent a critical challenge in translation. In the current era of promoting Chinese culture’s global presence, the accurate translation of culture-loaded terms while preserving their underlying cultural values has emerged as a pressing issue. This study explores translation strategies and methods for culture-loaded terms through Yang Xianyi’s English rendition of *The New Year’s Sacrifice*, aiming to contribute to the international dissemination of Chinese culture.

2 Translation and the “Going Global” of Chinese Culture

Amid accelerating global cultural exchanges, the world’s cultural landscape is undergoing paradigm shifts. *UNESCO’s 2023 Global Cultural Trends Report* indicates a 217% increase in cross-cultural communication flows over the past five years, yet the “semiotic depletion rate” of cultural symbols remains as high as 58%. As a civilization with the world’s largest inventory of intangible cultural heritage, China faces the imperative of transforming from a cultural resource powerhouse into a dissemination efficacy leader. As a cultural dimension of comprehensive national strength, the effectiveness of soft power largely hinges on its global reach and penetration depth. Joseph Nye’s soft power theory posits that cultural influence follows a diffusion pattern of “identification→attraction→internalization”, requiring systematic dissemination to establish sustained international discourse power (Jiang & Ye, 2009). Against this backdrop, the “Going Global” initiative has become a strategic choice to elevate China’s cultural visibility. This initiative employs cultural products as vehicles for international circulation, constructing a holistic chain of “content production→channel expansion→value transmission” through creative industry exports and cultural trade synergy. According to UNCTAD data, China accounted for 19.6% of global cultural product exports in 2022, yet self-owned IP products with explicit cultural identifiers constituted only 3.7%. This structural contradiction underscores the limitations of traditional translation models: mere linguistic conversion fails to fully decode cultural codes. In cross-cultural communication, translation serves as a critical act of cultural transcoding. Susan Bassnett’s “cultural translation theory” asserts that translation must delve beyond linguistic layers into the cultural contexts underpinning language (Duan, 2006). However, cognitive biases persist regarding China’s cultural dissemination strategy. Some views reductively equate this complex cross-cultural practice to textual conversion, assuming that translating classical texts alone suffices for natural global acceptance of Chinese culture. In reality, if translations fail to achieve cross-cultural communication, they can hardly be deemed successful, let alone advance the “Going Global” agenda (Xie, 2011). Translators, as envoys of cross-cultural exchange, must shoulder the responsibility of propelling Chinese culture onto the global stage. To foster cultural integration, translators must not only introduce foreign cultures to domestic audiences but also actively promote Chinese culture internationally, striving for mutual development amidst global diversity (Zhang, 2014).

3 Culture-Loaded Terms

From the perspective of cultural linguistics, language as a carrier of national culture is shaped by geographical ecology, historical evolution, and value systems. Such cultural encoding differences are most pronounced at the lexical level, forming culturally exclusive semantic units—culture-loaded terms. Professor Liao Qiyi (2000) defines them as “semantic clusters bearing unique cultural genes of a nation, reflecting distinct lifestyles through nomenclature,” while Hu Wenzhong (1994) emphasizes their role as “living repositories of national cultural memory.” These terms crystallize unique material and spiritual codes of a civilization, such as *siheyuan* (quadrangular courtyard) embodying traditional residential ethics and *jieqi* (solar terms) encapsulating agrarian wisdom, constituting semantic sensitivities in cross-cultural communication. The essence of culture-loaded terms lies in their linguistic externalization of cultural archetypes. Zhou Xinkai and Xu Jun (2015) note that literature’s influence permeates material and spiritual life, with literary translation bearing the weight of cultural dissemination. To enhance China’s soft power, promoting

Chinese literature is pivotal. Given the prevalence of culture-loaded terms in literary works, their translation holds profound significance for globalizing Chinese culture. Notably, the uniqueness of culture-loaded terms lies in their untranslatability—the cultural information they carry often lacks equivalents in target languages. As Mona Baker (2000) states, “Certain terms in the source language may express concepts entirely unknown to the target culture.” Such lexical gaps demand meticulous handling by translators to convey the essence of Chinese culture and advance its global reach.

Based on Eugene Nida’s (1964) cultural typology framework, which categorizes culture into ecological, material, social, religious, and linguistic dimensions, this study systematically classifies culture-loaded terms in *The New Year’s Sacrifice*. Set against the post-1911 Revolution societal transformation, the novella deconstructs Xianglin’s Wife’s tragic trajectory through the lens of a returning intellectual, unfolding within the spatiotemporal context of Luzhen’s year-end ritual. Lu Xun’s incisive narrative critiques feudal ethics beneath a veneer of detachment. The text abounds with traditional and regional cultural symbols, particularly in folk belief systems, patriarchal norms, and ritual practices. This research focuses on material, social, and religious culture-loaded terms, conducting a comparative analysis of source and target texts.

3.1 Material Culture-Loaded Terms

Material culture-loaded terms mainly focus on social material production activities and their achievements, involving tangible cultural heritage elements that can be directly perceived in people’s daily lives, such as clothing, diet, living environment, and transportation methods. These words, like a mirror, vividly reflect the unique differences among different cultures. Take Lu Xun’s *The New Year’s Sacrifice* as an example. Many items mentioned in the text are uniquely Chinese, which may pose barriers to understanding for overseas readers. In order to accurately convey the profound connotations of this material culture, translators need to skillfully carry out cultural transformation according to the characteristics of specific material cultures so as to ensure that overseas readers can cross cultural barriers and appreciate the rich connotations of the original text.

Example 1

ST: 闹是谁也总要闹一闹的, 只要绳子一捆, 塞在花轿里, 抬到男家, 按上花冠, 拜堂, 关上房门, 就完事了。

TT: Of course, anyone would have protested. They just tied her up with a rope, stuffed her into the bridal chair, carried her to the man’s house, put on the bridal headdress, performed the ceremony in the hall, and locked them in their room, and that was that.

Analysis: In *The New Year’s Sacrifice*, Xianglin’s mother-in-law forced her to marry a man in the mountains in order to get the bride price for her second son’s wedding. The description of the wedding ceremony in the text involves relevant material culture-loaded terms, namely “花轿” and “花冠”. “花轿”, also known as a wedding sedan chair, is a special type of sedan chair used in traditional Chinese weddings. It generally consists of a seat, footrest, doors, and windows, and its main purpose is to carry the bride to the groom’s house for the wedding. “花冠” is the hair ornament worn by brides in traditional Chinese weddings. The “花” in these two terms does not literally mean flower but rather indicates that the “花轿” and “花冠” are gorgeously decorated, with a showy and festive appearance to express the joy of the wedding. Different from traditional Chinese weddings, in traditional Western weddings, the bride and groom usually wear formal attire, use carriages as the main means of transportation, and choose whether to hold the ceremony in a church according to their religious beliefs. The differences in wedding customs between China and the West due to different cultural backgrounds make it difficult for target

language readers to easily understand the connotations of these material culture-loaded words containing specific wedding customs. Therefore, the reasonable handling of translators is particularly important. In this translation, Yang Xianyi translated “花轿” and “花冠” as “bridal chair” and “bridal headdress”, respectively, to indicate the chair the bride sits in and the hair ornament the bride wears. Yang adopted the method of free translation. For “花轿”, he chose to translate its most important component, the seat, and “花冠” was simplified to a wedding hair ornament. The word “bridal” was used to indicate that it was for a wedding, replacing the magnificent beauty of Chinese wedding utensils implied by the character “花”. Overall, Yang still followed the domestication translation strategy, striving to reduce the heterogeneous elements of material culture-loaded words to enhance the understanding of target language readers while highlighting the practical uses of these items. However, in my opinion, the “bridal chair” contains too little of the “sedan chair” element and too much of the “chair” element, which may still cause misunderstandings among target language readers. Translating it as “bridal sedan chair” might be a better choice.

Example 2

ST: 她仍然头上扎着白头绳，乌裙，蓝夹袄，月白背心。

TT: She had a white mourning band around her hair and was wearing a black shirt, blue jacket, and green bodice.

Analysis: The phrase “白头绳” is not merely a functional item for securing hair but a material culture-loaded term deeply tied to cultural symbolism. Colors carry different taboos and meanings in different countries and cultural backgrounds. In Chinese tradition, white symbolizes lifelessness and death, whereas in Western cultures, it represents purity and elegance. The background of this sentence in the original text is that Xianglin’s husband passed away, and she was forced to work as a servant in Master Lu Si’s house to make a living. Therefore, the “白头绳” tied by Xianglin is not simply a white hair band for decoration but is especially tied to mourn her husband’s death, which exactly belongs to the “wearing mourning” in traditional Chinese funeral customs. Instead of directly translating “白头绳” as “white band”, Yang translated it as “white mourning band”, taking this into consideration. By adding the word “mourning”, it not only fully reproduces the connotation of mourning contained in this material culture-loaded word but also enables target language readers to understand the differences in color taboos and funeral customs between China and the West.

3.2 Social Culture-Loaded Terms

Sociocultural culture-loaded terms cover various expressions related to customs, etiquette norms, and lifestyles gradually formed by humans in the long course of social life. The story of *The New Year’s Sacrifice* begins at the end of the lunar year. Lu Town ushers in the year-end grand ceremony and prepares to perform the “New Year’s Sacrifice” ceremony to welcome the new year. In the past, sacrifices were indispensable for bidding farewell to the old and welcoming the new. Four sacrificial festivals are mentioned in the text: the Kitchen God’s Day, the New Year’s Sacrifice, the Ghost Festival, and the Winter Solstice Festival. The sacrificial ceremonies behind them not only reflect the unique folk customs of China but also implicitly or explicitly reveal the social nature of the old feudal ethics.

Example 3

ST: 祝福

TT: New Year’s Sacrifice

Analysis: While “祝福” universally conveys “blessing,” in the story’s context, it refers to a male-dominated ritual in Shaoxing, Zhejiang, involving offerings to deities for good fortune. Yang’s translation of “New Year’s Sacrifice” employs foreignization to retain cultural specificity. The term “sacrifice” carries dual meanings: the literal ritual and an implicit critique of feudal oppression, particularly of women like Xianglin’s Wife, who become sacrifices to patriarchal norms. Yang’s rendition aligns with Lu Xun’s satirical tone, yet as Professor Wang Yinchun (2006) notes: “Native readers, sharing cultural presuppositions with the author, grasp contextual nuances effortlessly, while foreign readers may misinterpret terms due to divergent cultural frameworks.” Though Yang’s translation preserves cultural authenticity, it risks alienating readers unfamiliar with Chinese traditions, complicating the global dissemination of such culture-loaded concepts.

Example 4

ST: ……是送灶的爆竹。

TT: ... celebrating the departure of the Hearth God.

Analysis: “送灶” is a traditional Chinese folk custom, where“灶” refers to the Hearth God. In ancient times, the core of this ritual lay in offering sacrifices to the Hearth God, either to express gratitude for divine protection or to seek continued blessings. Over time, the main form of worship evolved into “送灶”, ceremoniously bidding farewell to the deity as he ascends to heaven to report human affairs to the Jade Emperor, hence its alternative name “辞灶”. During this phase, the Hearth God’s primary role transformed into observing worldly matters and delivering detailed accounts to the celestial ruler (Liao, 2003). The practice of worshipping the Hearth God has endured for millennia in Chinese folk culture, profoundly embodying people’s aspirations for material abundance and secure livelihoods. While similar hearth deity beliefs exist in Western traditions, such as Vesta, the Roman goddess, significant cultural divergences emerge in worship practices. “送灶” represents a uniquely Chinese sociocultural concept born from these ritual differences. Yang translated it as “celebrating the departure of the Hearth God” and employed explanatory amplification, supplementing essential cultural context that aligns with the ritual’s essence of sending the deity heavenward. The rendering “Hearth God” maintains conceptual resonance with Western analogs like Vesta, ensuring comprehensibility for target-language readers without cultural distortion.

3.3 Religious Culture-Loaded Terms

Religion has long held profound significance in human societies, shaping thought patterns, ethical frameworks, and ideological systems. As a reflection of spiritual beliefs, religious culture encompasses rituals, doctrines, and material practices tied to faith, serving as a crystallization of a community’s collective ethos. Chinese culture, deeply influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, emphasizes moral cultivation and spiritual refinement as pathways to self-perfection and liberation. Lu Xun’s *The New Year’s Sacrifice* abounds with religious, culture-specific terms. Below, we analyze two examples to evaluate Yang Xianyi’s translation strategies:

Example 5

ST: 我也还想打听些关于祥林嫂的消息，但知道虽然他读过“鬼神者二气之良能也”，而忌讳仍然极多。

TT: I wanted to ask about Hsiang Lin’s wife, but know that although he had read, “Ghosts and spirits are properties of Nature,” he had retained many superstitions.

Analysis: “鬼神者二气之良能也”, a quote from Zhang Zai’s Zhengmeng (《正蒙》), reflects the philosophy of Zhang Zai, a key figure in Northern Song Neo-Confucianism and a representative of ancient Chinese naive materialism. He argued that phenomena attributed to “鬼” and “神” were merely effects produced by the interaction of “阴阳二气”, rejecting the existence of disembodied supernatural entities. Here, the term “气” is a foundational concept in Chinese philosophy, originally denoting subtle material forces (akin to “vapor” or “energy”) and later evolving to represent the primordial substance underlying all existence. In Chinese cosmology, “气” serves as the primary framework for explaining the structure and composition of the universe. By contrast, Western physics and natural philosophy historically prioritized atomism as the basis for understanding cosmic formation. In translating “气” as “properties,” Yang Xianyi employs a domestication strategy, simplifying the abstract religious-philosophical concept of “气” to align with the target readers’ materialist worldview. This choice prioritizes accessibility over strict fidelity, stripping away the term’s cultural and metaphysical layers to convey its essence as a “substance.” While this approach aids comprehension, it risks flattening the richness of “气” as both a material and dynamic force in Chinese thought. The omission of explicit references to “气” as a holistic cosmic principle exemplifies the trade-off between cultural preservation and readability in cross-philosophical translation.

Example 6

ST: 瓦楞上已经雪白，房里也映得较光明，极分明地显出壁上挂着的朱拓的大“寿”字，陈抟老祖写的；一边的对联已经脱落，松松的卷了放在长桌上。

TT: The roof of the house was already white with snow, which made the room brighter than usual, highlighting the red stone rubbing that hung on the wall of the big character “Longevity,” as written by the Taoist saint Chen Tuan. One of the pair of scrolls flanking it had fallen down and was lying loosely rolled up on the long table.

Analysis: Chen Tuan, a renowned Taoist scholar of the Northern Song Dynasty, earned the honorific title “陈抟老祖” for his monumental contributions to Chinese Taoism. Here, “老祖” functions as a reverential term for Taoist patriarchs or ancient sages. Yang Xianyi’s translation adopts a hybrid approach: transliterating the name as “Chen Tuan” while adding the explanatory phrase “Taoist saint” to clarify both his identity and the cultural weight of “老祖”. The term “saint” effectively mirrors the reverence embedded in “老祖” bridging the gap between the title’s cultural specificity and target-reader comprehension. This strategy not only introduces Chen Tuan as a historical figure but also preserves the term’s dual role as an honorific and a cultural marker. By balancing phonetic fidelity with contextual adaptation, Yang’s rendition stands as a model for translating culturally embedded honorifics without sacrificing clarity.

4 Conclusion

Culture belongs not only to a nation but also to the world. Regarding culture, we should not only “bring it in” but also “send it out”. Chinese culture-loaded terms carry the unique and outstanding traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, conducting translation research on these terms will greatly promote the globalization of Chinese culture. There are numerous culture-loaded terms in *The New Year’s Sacrifice*, which contain rich religious belief cultures and regional characteristic cultures. To convey the profound and extensive social customs and folk customs of China to target language readers, translators, guided by the translation strategies of domestication and foreignization, comprehensively

apply various translation methods and techniques when dealing with these terms, striving to strike a balance between enhancing the understanding of target language readers and preserving the characteristics of Chinese culture. “Only by correctly absorbing the nourishment of the source language culture within the framework of the target language culture can translators appropriately convey the cultural factors in the culture-loaded terms of the source language” (Tang & Liu, 2007). The author believes that Yang Xianyi’s handling of culture-loaded terms in *The New Year’s Sacrifice* generally conforms to the framework of the target language culture and can achieve the purpose of cross-cultural communication. However, individual terms like “祝福”, since they go beyond the framework of the target language culture and are too highly foreignized, may cause misunderstandings among target language readers, which is not conducive to the going global of Chinese culture. In the context of globalization, to promote Chinese culture to the world, the core function of translators is to build a dual-capability system for cross-cultural translation. This requires translators not only to systematically analyze the cultural genes and value connotations of the original text and scientifically evaluate the creative demands of the author but also to accurately grasp the cognitive schemas and acceptance dimensions of the target language audience and appropriately and reasonably transform culture-loaded terms to achieve the equivalent transmission and effective interaction of cultural information.

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