

Research on the English Translation of Folk Culture-loaded Words in The Wedding Party from the Perspective of Cultural Translation

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Abstract: The Wedding Party is rich in culture-loaded words that are specific to old Beijing. These words carry unique cultural connotations that are deeply rooted in the traditions and beliefs of the Chinese people. In order to address this challenge, this paper aims to explore English translation strategies for culture-loaded words in The Wedding Party, specifically focusing on folk culture-loaded words at the material, social, belief, and linguistic levels. By examining examples from the text, we can gain a better understanding on how these words can be effectively translated while preserving their cultural connotations.

Keywords: Cultural Translation; Wedding Party; Folk Culture-loaded Words

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the continuous global dissemination of Chinese culture, an increasing number of remarkable Chinese works have captured the attention of people worldwide. Translation, serving as a crucial means and method, plays a vital role in the internationalization of Chinese culture. Similarly, for culture to spread effectively, it must grapple with the challenge of cultural translation. Susan Bassnett, a prominent translation scholar, introduced the theory of cultural translation, highlighting the pivotal role of culture in the translation process. Cultural attributes constitute a significant aspect of literary works. Therefore, to accurately convey the spiritual essence of these works, translators should employ judicious translation strategies within the framework of cultural translation.

Among them, the challenge of translating lies in culture-loaded words, also known as culture-specific words. These words encompass food and concept terms that are distinctive to a particular culture. They represent vocabulary

unique to various ethnic groups, rooted in the history, and possessing national characteristics and uniqueness[1]. Simultaneously, the culture-loaded words are often referred to as lexical gaps, as the cultural information embedded in these words may not have an equivalent in the target language[2]. The translator's handling of culture-loaded words directly reflects their translation proficiency.

The Wedding Party, translated by Tiang, represents both the first novel of author Liu Xinwu and the inaugural English translation of this work. The novel narrates the daily life of nine residents living in the vicinity of Beijing's Bell and Drum Towers, spanning from 5 a.m. to 5 p.m. on December 12, 1982. However, it shows decades of experiences and transformations of each character within this 12-hour time frame. The narrative vividly portrays the diverse life scenes of various social classes, effectively showcasing the lifestyle changes and social shifts in 1980s Beijing. Personal joys and sorrows interweave, producing a tableau of Beijing citizens' lives and revealing the varied existences on life's stage. The first edition of ZhongGu lou(The Bell and Drum Tower) was published by People's Literature Publishing House in 1985, but it wasn't until 2021 that the first English version emerged, a gap of over three decades. This significant temporal and spatial distance presented considerable challenges to the completion and dissemination of the translation. This study focuses on examining and discussing examples of the translation of culture-loaded words in the English version of The Wedding Party by Jeremy Tiang, a translator in 2021. This analysis aims to shed light on the strategies employed in handling culture-loaded words and their impact on preserving the emotional and cultural essence of the original work in translation.

2. Literature Review of The Wedding Party

The Bell and Drum Tower, the first novel by author Liu Xinwu, was initially published in the fifth and sixth issues of the magazine Contemporary in 1984. In 1985, People's Literature Publishing House released a standalone edition, which won the second Mao Dun Literature Prize in the same year. In 2019, the novel was included in Collection of 70 Novels in 70 Years of New China. In 1993, a Japanese translation titled 北京下町物語 was published by Japan's Hengwen Press. As of now, there exists only one English translation, The Wedding Party, translated by Jeremy Tiang. It was published and made available for sale on Amazon in 2021, in various formats including paperback, hardcover, and e-book.

The Wedding Party is one of the works of China contemporary literature. Telling readers the story of China in the English reading circle has played its due role in spreading and carrying forward the traditional culture of China. So far, there is no research specifically dedicated to the English translation of The Bell and Drum Tower as found in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). Even studies on the original text of The Bell and Drum Tower are relatively sparse. The existing research primarily focuses on the following aspects: (1) the style and background of the novel. These studies explore the unique narrative style, literary techniques, and the sociocultural and historical context in which the novel was written. (2) the creative process and ideological content of the novel. These studies delve into Liu Xinwu's writing process, his inspirations, and the underlying ideological themes and messages conveyed through the novel. (3) the narrative perspective and characters of the novel. These studies analyze the narrative voice, point of view, and the portrayal of characters within the novel.

From the above analysis, it's clear that the study of The Bell and Drum Tower initially focused on the text itself. As research deepened, studies gradually expanded to connect the novel with its historical context and social implications. Early text-based studies resemble more reading reports, while most external studies primarily reflect the text's background. Therefore, these external studies could benefit from a broader perspective, incorporating other factors such as economic, cultural, and social context [3]. Additionally, comparative studies could be beneficial, such as examining multiple novels or comparing Liu

Xinwu's work with other authors from the same period. Cross-cultural comparisons with Western works from the same era could also yield insightful results. In summary, while some work has been done in analyzing The Bell and Drum Tower, there are still many unexplored research avenues that could deepen our understanding of this novel and its place within literature.

3. Culture Translation Theory and Culture-loaded Words

3.1 Culture Translation Theory

The 1980s indeed marked a significant shift in the field of translation theory, moving beyond a narrow focus on linguistics to embrace a broader cross-cultural perspective. Translators began conducting deeper analyses of translation within a broad cultural context, ushering in a new stage known as the theoretical stage of translation culture. This shift signifies a turning point in translation studies, where cultural considerations took center stage. During this transformative period, the study of translation theory underwent a cultural turn, with scholars exploring the intricate relationship between translation and culture. Notably, British translator Basnet made remarkable contributions to the formulation and advancement of cultural translation theory.

Basnet's emphasis on the close interconnection between language and culture underscores the pivotal role of translation as a means of cultural communication [4]. In the context of Contemporary British Translation Theory, the following key points highlight the significance of cultural translation theory: 1. Culture as a Translation Unit. Unlike traditional translation units that often focused on morphemes, sentences, or texts, she introduced culture itself as a translation unit. This shift broadens the scope of translation to encompass the cultural context. 2. Communication as the Core. Translation is viewed not merely as a mechanical "decoding-restructuring" process but, more importantly, as an act of communication. It goes beyond linguistic transfer and seeks to convey cultural meaning and nuances. 3. Focus on Cultural Equivalence. Translation, according to Basnet, should not be limited to replicating the description of the original text. Instead, it should prioritize achieving equivalence in the cultural functions of the target language. This ensures that the translated work resonates with

the cultural context of the audience. 4. Historical and Cultural Context. She recognizes that translation principles and norms evolve across different historical periods. However, these variations are all aimed at fulfilling diverse cultural needs. Translation is seen as a response to the specific cultural requirements and different groups within a given culture.

Translation serves the purpose of addressing the cultural needs of various groups within a specific culture[5] The theory of cultural translation underscores the importance of cultural communication and equivalence in cultural functions. Culture-loaded words, defined as terms, concepts, or elements related to a particular language and culture[6], are essential in the study of cultural translation. Thus, given this framework, the paper aims to explore the translation of culture-loaded words in the English version of *The Bell and Drum Tower*, guided by the principles of cultural translation theory. This study seeks to uncover how the translator navigates the challenges posed by culture-loaded words to ensure effective cultural communication and equivalence in the translated text.

3.2 Culture-loaded Words

British translator Maker Baker highlighted that culture-loaded words refer to concepts present in the source language but absent in the target language. These concepts can be concrete or abstract, encompassing aspects related to religious beliefs, social activities, or eating habits. Due to each nation's distinct development history, social system, ecological environment, religious beliefs, and folk customs, every language possesses its unique vocabulary, allusions, proverbs, and more. Culture-loaded words serve as a manifestation of a nation's distinctive historical, cultural, and religious characteristics. They emerge because different countries have distinct languages, influencing people's thought processes. Consequently, individuals in different countries develop varying understandings of things. The diverse experiences, developments, cultures, and values of each country impact language, resulting in distinct language usage and expression habits. Folk culture-loaded words serve as carriers for describing folk culture, encompassing words and idioms that carry information and connotations related to folk culture. They reflect the cultural and historical traditions of a particular group of

people, marking specific aspects of their life. According to Richard M. Dossen, a professor of American folklore, folk customs are oral, traditional, and unofficial expressions of folk culture. This aligns with the characteristics of folk culture-loaded words: popularity and unique tradition. Folk culture is created and applied by people in their daily practices, and culture-loaded words are primarily utilized in oral communication, passed down from generation to generation, emphasizing their popular nature. Folk customs, being oral and traditional, are significant symbols distinguishing one culture from another. In the context of China's long cultural history, many folk customs are intertwined with the country's unique historical traditions. As a result, these folk culture-loaded words often carry cultural traditions with distinct Chinese characteristics and embody unique traditions.

Eugene Nida (1945) categorized culture-loaded words into five types based on the distinct social, linguistic, and cultural characteristics of various countries: ecological, material, social life, religious, and linguistic cultural-loaded words. Wu Bingan, a prominent Chinese folklorist, defined folk culture through four dimensions: economy, society, belief, and entertainment (oral literature, song, and dance) [7]. Combining the two classification standards, folk culture-loaded words can be divided into four categories: (1) material folk culture-loaded words (encompassing aspects like labor, land, transportation, food, clothing, housing, and infrastructure), (2) social folk culture-loaded words (covering family, kinship terms, wedding and funeral customs, and other folk legacies), (3) belief folk culture-loaded words (involving natural beliefs, religious beliefs, ancestral beliefs), (4) language folk culture-loaded words (including folk proverbs, sayings, and customs).

Hence, this paper will delve into the analysis of these loaded words through the lenses of material folk culture, social folk culture, belief folk culture, and language folk culture.

4. Analysis of Translation Examples of Culture-loaded Words in *The Wedding Party*

4.1 Material Folk Culture-Loaded Words

Material folk culture-loaded words encompass folk customs such as labor, land, transportation, diet, clothing, housing, and more. These words

are closely related to people's lives, playing a vital role in depicting their real local cultural background. In recent years, as China's cultural influence has expanded, words like "dumpling" and "tofu" have gradually become familiar to Western readers through transliteration. Translators often opt for transliteration when dealing with these words[8]. However, certain place names like "四合院 siheyuan", "什刹海 shichahai", "王府井大街 Wangfujing street" and "胡同 hutong" are directly presented to aid readers' understanding. Nevertheless, many descriptions of objects, clothing, and houses in the source text presents challenges. Simply transliterating these words can increase readers' cognitive load and create a cultural gap between Eastern and Western cultures, potentially diluting the allure of such cultural elements. Balancing accuracy and reader accessibility becomes crucial in avoiding this potential cultural disconnect.

Example 1: 咸菜、焦圈、烧饼、芙蓉鸡片、糟熘鱼片、宫保肉丁、清炖狮子头、赛螃蟹、蘑菇油菜、安东鸡、松鼠鱼、黄雀肉片。

Translated text : pickled vegetables, dough fritters, flatbread, the chicken in egg sauce or fish in rice wine, kung pao pork, lions' head meatballs, imitation crab, and mushrooms with rapini, Dong'an chicken, sweet and sour fish, and deep-fried sparrow.

The translation strategies employed, including literal translation and transliteration combined with literal translation, aim to convey the practical significance of the original text and enhance reader understanding and acceptance. However, there are some limitations, as seen in the translation of terms like "imitation crab", where the English meaning may not accurately reflect the dish's nature.

In addition, "厢房" and "耳房" in the source text are typical material folk culture-loaded words. "厢房" refers to the houses on both sides before the main house, while "耳房" refers to one or two rooms on both sides of the main house, which are deep and small in height. The translator translates them as "side residences" and "ear rooms, would have been used as studies or retiring rooms". The former represents a more liberal translation aimed at conveying the meaning accurately, while "ear rooms" with annotations provides a literal translation to aid reader comprehension. These strategies reflect

the translator's effort to balance fidelity to the original text with clarity and accessibility for the target audience.

The translator's approach of employing a combination of free translation, literal translation, and a blend of both for material folk culture-loaded words is strategic. By considering cultural context, text content, and corresponding items in the translation, this method aims to enhance target readers' understanding of the text. This versatile approach allows for effective communication of nuanced cultural concepts while maintaining readability and clarity.

4.2 Social Folk Culture-load Words

The social folk culture-loaded words, encompassing aspects like family, kinship, weddings, and funerals, are closely related to historical background and social systems. The novel, centered on the marriage of Xue's youngest son, vividly portrays various wedding customs deeply rooted in China's social development. Expressions like "生辰八字", "黄底红喜字", "汤封", "红案" carry a strong folk flavor. The translator aptly opts for the translations, capturing the customs and cultural concepts to convey their meanings accurately, such as "compatible birth dates and "matched horoscopes", "double-happiness paper cuttings, red on yellow", "a red paper soup envelope", "red position of cooking meat and vegetables".

Example 2: 女方一下轿, 便要立即拜堂, 早先都是先对着"天地码儿"(神像)拜.....此外还有拜高堂、拜姑嫜、夫妻对拜等无数的拜; 此后是入洞房、揭盖头、坐床、更衣.....

Translated text: As soon as the bride got out of the sedan chair, she had to pay her respects to the "symbols of heaven and earth" (that is, statues of the gods), ... The couple would then pay their respects to the bride's parents, the groom's parents, and each other, Next would be entering the nuptial chamber, lifting the bride's veil, sitting on the bed, changing outfits,...

The depiction of wedding ceremonies, including the bride under the sedan and the worship process involving worship heaven and earth, parents, and couple worship each other, illustrates the concept of "heaven and earth marriage", embodying Chinese cultural heritage. The accurate translation of titles like "高堂" for parents and "姑嫜" for male parents reflects the cultural nuances. For rituals like "入洞房、揭盖

头、坐床、更衣”，the translator employs literal translation to convey the precise meaning, enhancing the reader’s understanding of the text content.

In translating socially laden folk cultural terms, the translator employs a literal translation method, considering the specific social and textual contexts. This approach ensures fidelity to the original text while enabling target readers to gain a deeper understanding of the social culture and specific cultural nuances embedded within the text.

4.3 Belief Folk Culture-load Words

Belief culture, a psychological and cultural phenomenon shaped through people’s cognitive processes, also referred to as spiritual folklore, primarily encompasses people’s religious beliefs, worship practices, and superstitions regarding gods[9]. It serves as the bedrock of every country and national culture, showcasing distinct national characteristics. In recent years, Chinese traditional cultural classics such as “The Analects of Confucius” and “Tao Te Ching” have gained widespread recognition overseas, profoundly influencing Western philosophy. Representative terms like “阴阳 yinyang” and “风水 fengshui” have become familiar to Western readers and are often directly transliterated. The source text also encompasses folk religious beliefs and the worship of deities.

Example 3: 他虔诚地相信过“因果报应”。

Translated text: He devoutly believes we are rewarded or punished for our deeds.

Example 4: 今世行善积德，来世必有好报。今世为非作歹，来世必为饿鬼、畜生。

Translated text: If we are good in this life and accumulate merit, we’ll get paid back in the next life. If we do wicked things, our next life will be spent as a hungry ghost or beast.

Example 5: 倘不能解脱，便要无休止地在地、人、阿修罗、地狱、饿鬼、畜生这“六道”中如车轮般旋转不停地生死相续。

Translated text: If not, you’re doomed to move endlessly through the six realms of reincarnation: heaven, humanity, asuras, hell, hungry ghosts, beasts.

Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Since Buddhism’s introduction to China around 67 AD, it has interacted with and influenced various local beliefs and concepts. Concepts such as “因果报应 karma”, “地狱 hell”, “轮回

reincarnation”, and “来世 afterlife”, commonly discussed today, are all rooted in Buddhist thought. In the sentences of Example 3 and Example 5, the concept of karma emphasizes that actions have consequences, with good deeds yielding positive outcomes and evil deeds resulting in negative repercussions. The six realms in the cycle of karma (Heaven, Human, Asura, Hell, Hungry Ghost, and Anima) reflect the belief in reincarnation, wherein beings are reborn into different realms based on their actions in previous lives. In the novel, Lu Baosang caused a riot at the wedding banquet, and the owner’s belongings were stolen. This incident made Uncle Xue think that his misfortune was caused by past wrong behavior, which explained the concept of bad karma. Consequently, there is an emphasis on performing virtuous deeds to secure positive outcomes in the afterlife or to avoid undesirable rebirths in hell or as animals. The translation of the proverb “因果报应” involves a free translation that captures its essence. In the sentence of Example 4, the use of antithetical sentences and the “if” clause in the translation adds depth and beauty to the expression, reflecting the original text’s contrastive nature.

Indeed, in the translation process, it’s crucial for translators to adapt vocabulary and expressions to suit the cultural customs and context of the target audience. By doing so, they can enhance the readability and cultural relevance of the translation, ultimately improving its understandability. This flexibility allows translators to convey the intended meaning effectively while also preserving the essence and cultural nuances of the original text.

4.4 Language Folk Culture-load Words

Language folk culture-loaded words, comprising folk proverbs, sayings, and oral literature, often exhibit characteristics such as rigorous structure, concise form and catchy mouth. Its evolution is deeply intertwined with specific social, historical, and cultural contexts. Some language folk customs can find corresponding cultural parallels in the target culture. For instance, the Chinese saying “隔墙有耳” easily resonates with its counterpart “Walls have ears” in other cultures. However, due to variations in geography, customs, and other factors, linguistic folklore inevitably carries distinct national cultural traits and information. Similarly, The

Bell and Drum Tower also contains a large number of idioms and expressions. During translation, rather than opting for direct translation, translators adeptly use simpler language while preserving certain stylistic elements to accurately convey semantics. For more complex sentences, translators may choose to omit them.

Example 6: 同学们都觉得他很滑稽: “小磊子想吃天鹅肉呢!”

Translated text: His schoolmates found hysterical, “Xun Lei’s set his sights too high!”

Example 7: 然而, 在钟鼓楼边生息不已的人们之中, 像这传说中那种纯善与极恶的人只是极少数; 呈现于钟鼓楼下的大量生活场景, 也并非都是“月黑杀人夜”或“风高放火天”。

Translated text: Even so, few people in the perpetually bustling crowds around the Bell and Drum Towers are as innocent or as evil as the characters in the story, and you rarely see scenes of murder or mayhem around here.

Example 8: “后门”: 请客送礼、以位易位(你给我安排一个, 我给你安排一个)、热线要挟、秘书传话……乃至坐着小轿车来“御驾亲征”、拿着“尚方宝剑”(某大人物开的条子)来当场“宣谕”。

Translated text: the back door: hosting dinners, sending gifts, exchanging positions (you arrange one for me, I’ll arrange one for you), calling the hotline with threatening messages, or soliciting recommendations from important people.

In the sentence of example 6, the proverb “癞蛤蟆想吃天鹅肉(Toad wants to eat swan meat)” conveys the desire for something impossible. Translators opt for free translation over a literal one, recognizing the cultural differences between the East and West. Phrases like “月黑杀人夜(murder night in the dark of the moon)” and “风高放火天(high winds set fire to the sky)” in the example 7 depict severe weather and provide a metaphor for evildoers taking advantage of such conditions. The translator employs the phrase “murder or mayhem” to convey the meaning more effectively for readers. Similarly, in the example 8, “尚方宝剑” and “御驾亲征” both describe great authority. The translator omits them, focusing on annotating the text to enhance readability, albeit at the cost of some contextual richness.

In essence, when translating words laden with folk culture, the translator doesn’t simply

translate and annotate them; instead, they deftly handle them, employ simpler language, accurately convey their meaning, and improve the readability of the translation. In some cases, the translator may choose to omit some words altogether.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, when translating words laden with cultural significance, translators employ flexible strategies to accurately convey meaning and enhance reader comprehension. For the material culture-loaded words, transliteration, transliteration with literal translation, literal translation with annotation are utilized, while for language folk culture-loaded words, free translation or omission is preferred. Through this translation process, translators consider cultural and social backgrounds to bridge East and West cultural differences while prioritizing readability alongside cultural fidelity. This approach ensures effective communication of the source language’s meaning, making it more accessible to readers.

China boasts a wealth of cultural masterpieces, replete with words laden with profound cultural connotations. Novel translation serves as a vital conduit for cultural dissemination abroad, bearing significant practical and communicative value. Translators assume a pivotal role in this process, necessitating a high level of proficiency. Hence, when translating, it’s imperative for translators to deftly navigate these culturally rich words, effectively conveying their meanings while accurately grasping the nuances of the original text. In doing so, they not only facilitate the translation of outstanding works but also foster cross-cultural communication.

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