

A Study on Chinese-English Translation of Culture-Loaded Words in Shanghai's Intangible Cultural Heritage under the Theory of Functional Equivalence

Yiqiao Lu^{1,a,*}

¹Schools of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Institute of Technology, Shanghai, 201418, China

a. louisbaby2001@163.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: In today's era of rapid globalization, effective cross-cultural communication and precise translation work are more vital than ever. Cultural-loaded words, which carry the nuanced meaning to particular cultures, stand at the forefront of this cultural exchange. Shanghai is an international metropolis renowned for its abundant and diverse intangible cultural heritage. Given this rich tapestry of cultural treasures, the demand for an accurate and good translation is imperative. Ensuring that the essence of Shanghai's cultural heritage is accurately preserved and communicated across linguistic boundaries is therefore a crucial task in today's interconnected world. This paper delves into the challenges and strategies involved in translating the cultural-loaded words from Chinese into English within the context of Shanghai's intangible cultural heritage. Taking the Functional Equivalence Theory as the theoretical framework, various translation methods including literal translation, transliteration, and free translation are examined in this research, emphasizing their effectiveness in preserving cultural meanings. Practical applications and challenges in translating terms with culturally nuanced terms are demonstrated by analyzing the case studies from the *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Shanghai Intangible Cultural Heritage*. This research not only highlights the significance of balancing cultural context and intelligibility in between source language (SL) and target language (TL), but also demonstrates the role of Functional Equivalence Theory as a vital tool for facilitating cultural exchange. In conclusion, the paper provides valuable insights into the complexities of translating cultural-loaded words and presents approaches for translating cultural-loaded words in Shanghai's intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Functional Equivalence, Cultural-Loaded Words, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Translation Strategies

1. Introduction

The crisis brought about by modern civilization has spurred a global cultural movement aimed at rediscovering their cultural roots, as nations reexamine their rich traditional heritage and wisdom to address the challenges posed by globalization. China, renowned for its long-standing history and profound cultural heritage, also confronts the challenge of preserving its indigenous intangible cultural heritage. And Shanghai, as a leading international metropolis and economic hub of China,

has recently garnered considerable attention worldwide due to its diverse and vibrant intangible cultural heritage. Despite the growing interest in studying translation strategies of the cultural-loaded words in intangible cultural heritage, there remains a scarcity of published information on the Chinese-English translation strategy of such words in Shanghai's intangible cultural heritage. Moreover, the translation of cultural-loaded words has always been the subject of extensive systematic investigation. The Functional Equivalence Theory, as an instrumental theory in translation, provides a practical and systematic approach to translating the cultural-loaded words in Shanghai's intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, this paper, focusing on the translation procedures and theories for the cultural-loaded words in Shanghai's intangible cultural heritage based on the Functional Equivalence Theory, explores the application of translation strategies of the cultural-loaded words in Shanghai's intangible cultural heritage.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview of Functional Equivalence Theory

The concept of Functional Equivalence, pioneered by Eugene A. Nida, a significant figure in linguistics and translation studies, revolutionized the way translators approached their craft. Nida, whose work spanned the mid-20th century, emphasized a methodology that moved beyond literal word-for-word translation. His theories were instrumental in bridging the gap between the meaning of the source text and the cultural context of the TL.

Nida's principles were first detailed in his seminal work, *Toward a Science of Translating*, where he argued for a more nuanced approach to translation that accounted for cultural and linguistic differences [1]. In *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, published in 1969, Nida gave the definition of dynamic equivalence, which is "the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the SL [2]."

In *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Nida distinguished between two types of equivalence: "dynamic" and "formal." Dynamic equivalence aims at complete naturalness of expression, seeking to convey the original text's message with the same impact on the target audience as it had on the source audience. In contrast, formal equivalence maintains the form and content of the SL but often at the expense of natural expression in the TL. Initially, Nida developed the concept of "dynamic equivalence", to emphasize recreating the effect of the original text in the translation.

However, this approach was sometimes misunderstood as prioritizing content over form. Therefore, in 1982, Nida published *From one language to another*, which mentioned the concept of functional equivalence, thus explaining that there is no difference between "dynamic equivalence" and "functional equivalence." The notion of functional equivalence comprises two major parts. First, Nida believes that the context and content of translation should be the priority. To achieve the equivalence between SL and TL, certain methods can be adopted to compensate for the loss of meaning, and translators do not have to strictly follow word-to-word or sentence-to-sentence equivalence. Second, translators must take contextual factors and the readers (audience) of the TL into consideration. Nida believes that to make the translation natural and smooth, three factors should be fully considered: the SL and SL's culture as a whole, the specific language environment, and the TL audience. To achieve functional equivalence, these three factors are indispensable [3].

Meanwhile, the theory is not without its critics. Some scholars argue that it can lead to oversimplification and the loss of the source text's nuances [4]. For example, Zhang believes that functional equivalence cannot be practiced in translation, since the extent how which recipients absorb the contextual meaning differs among cultures [5]; Huang believes that the subjective nature of judging the "same response" between the source and target text readers is a significant limitation,

which can lead to translations that deviate from the original intent or style, and the cultural and historical differences make it challenging to achieve a consistent response.

Despite these criticisms and queries, Nida's theory remains a milestone in translation studies, especially when dealing with texts deeply embedded in cultural contexts. Therefore, when it comes to the translation of the cultural-loaded words within intangible cultural heritage.

2.2. An Overview of Culture-Specific Items

Research in culture-specific words has a long history. In 1996, Aixela popularized the term “culture-specific items” (or “cultural-loaded words”) to describe “those textually actualized items whose function and connotations in a source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the nonexistence of the referred item or its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text [6]”. For Liao, culture-loaded words are those words, phrases, or idioms used to express something specific to a culture, and these words reflect the unique mode of activity that each nation has accumulated throughout history, which is different from other nations [7]. The culture-specific items in the translation of intangible cultural heritage include person names, place names, article names, art forms, dynasties, folk customs, classics, and common expressions of historical events, myths, and legends [8].

As Aixela states: “The main difficulty with the definition lies, of course, in the fact that in a language everything is culturally produced, beginning with language itself.” Venuti also points out that “The ‘misery’ of translation is its impossibility, because of irreducible differences which are not only linguistic but also cultural [9].” Overall, previous research shows that the difficulty of translating cultural-loaded words arises from the intrinsic complexity and unique characteristics of the SL context. Therefore, readers from the TL cannot understand the meaning since there are no counterparts in the target culture. Moreover, intangible cultural heritage often encompasses elements of oral tradition, storytelling, and local knowledge, which are difficult to transfer accurately across languages. These elements often rely on context, tone, and cultural background, making it challenging to retain the true essence when translated. To Nida, “Knowing two cultures is even more important to a translator than knowing two languages [10].” Culture-specific items have been extensively studied in linguistics, sociology, cross-cultural research, and education. They hold significant importance in cross-cultural communication and language learning, as understanding cultural-loaded items can help people better comprehend the differences and similarities between diverse cultures.

3. Translation Strategies of Cultural-loaded Words from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory

3.1. A Discussion of the Translation Strategies

Various studies have discussed the translation strategies of cultural-loaded words in intangible cultural heritage. The following strategies are mentioned the most: literal translation, transliteration, and free translation (also the use of annotation). For example, Chen believes that strategies including literal translation (plus transliteration), transliteration (plus annotation), transliteration plus in-text annotation, transliteration plus category, and generalization words can be adopted; Wu points out that methods including transliteration (plus annotation), literal translation plus annotation, and free translation can be used to translate cultural-loaded words [11]. However, some studies give a novel perspective by proposing strategies such as generalization, specification, substitution, omission, subtraction, etc., providing insights into a more specific choice of strategy. In the following case study, this paper will discuss using strategies including literal translation, transliteration, addition, omission, substitution, free translation, and annotation.

3.2. Case Study – Excerpts from Illustrated Encyclopedia of Shanghai Intangible Culture Heritage

The excerpts illustrated in this section and the corresponding English translations are both from the *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Shanghai Intangible Culture Heritage* published by the Shanghai Administration of Culture, Radio, Film and Television, to observe various translation strategies adopted. Examples will be given to explain the application of different translation strategies and summarize the examples and their corresponding strategies.

3.2.1. Literal Translation

Literal translation aims to not alter the original words and sentences, and strictly speaking, it strives to keep the form and content of the SL. It is also one of the common ways to translate cultural-loaded words.

Source text: 上海龙华庙会；豫园灯会；Corresponding translation: Longhua Temple Fair in Shanghai; Yuyuan Lantern Show

From the examples given above, literal translation can be applied to the cultural-loaded words which have their equivalence word by word, in both form and content. It can avoid excessive interpretation from the translator. The given examples are all well-known and traditional intangible cultural heritage from Shanghai.

It should be noted that in literal translation, the chosen words must be carefully selected after a full and in-depth understanding of the cultural background behind the culture-specific items. For example, the choice of words between “庙会” and “灯会” is an excellent example. In the translation of “庙会”, “会” is rendered as “Fair”, which refers to a traditional event where people gather to celebrate and participate in various cultural and entertainment activities at a temple. In this translation of “灯会”, “会” is translated as “Show”, highlighting the aspect of a grand display or exhibition of lanterns and related performances. The appropriate choice of translation ensures that the unique features and traditions of Shanghai's intangible cultural heritage are effectively communicated to international readers, facilitating cross-cultural understanding.

3.2.2. Transliteration

Transliteration refers to spelling out Chinese words with pinyin, which is also one of the most common ways to translate culture-loaded words.

Source text: 评弹，是评话和弹词的合称；Corresponding translation: Pingtān is the general term for pínghua (storytelling) and tāncí (ballad singing).

Pingtān was introduced into Shanghai from Suzhou in the mid-19th century. Such performances are well known for their minute descriptions, in soft, pleasant Wu dialect, and with jokes now and then. With the rapid growth of Shanghai's economy and population, there appeared an increasingly large market for storytelling with more performers, more plays, and more advanced performing techniques.

Source text: 豫园灯会历史悠久，王韬在《瀛壖杂记》（1875年出版）中就有关于其盛况的记载；Corresponding translation: Yuyuan lantern show has a long history. Wang Tao described this spectacular event in his *Yinruan Zaji* or *Seaside Miscellaneous* published in 1875.

Yuyuan lantern show originates from the Han dynasty. It is the best-known and the most influential folk festival. *Seaside Miscellaneous* describes the ancient and old events quoted from the writings of predecessors and mentions reflections on the various changes in the early days of Shanghai's port opening, which is the most remarkable place of the book.

In the given examples, transliteration is adopted in both of the sentences, including people names,

book names, and the names of intangible cultural heritage. As many studies have mentioned, transliteration can be used with other translation strategies. It is worth mentioning that in the two sentences given, an extra explanation is given to provide more cultural information (except for people's names and names of places). Wu (2011) believes that important information on intangible cultural heritage should be highlighted. Therefore, when applying transliteration to the translation of intangible cultural heritage, it is essential that other translation strategies are applied in order to supplement the lack or deficiency of contextual information, since it may not convey cultural or contextual nuances associated with specific words or phrases, potentially leading to misunderstandings or misinterpretations.

3.2.3. Addition

Addition refers to the supplement of the implicit information from the SL. It is an essential translation strategy to compensate for the loss of meaning.

Source text: 月浦锣鼓; Corresponding translation: Yuepu Drum Concerto

Yuepu Drum Concerto is a traditional local opera form that spreads in Yuepu Town, Baoshan District, Shanghai, China. It originated in the Qing Dynasty and has a long history. This art form combines speaking, singing, acting, playing, and other performance techniques, with strong local characteristics and folk flavor. It is usually accompanied by gong and drum instruments, the rhythm is bright, full of changes, and has a strong sense of appreciation and entertainment. It is not only very popular among the local community, but also one of the important intangible cultural heritages. In traditional festivals or special celebrations, the performance of Yuepu Drum Concerto is an indispensable part, which not only shows the charm of local culture but also promotes the unity of the community and the inheritance of culture.

In the corresponding translation, the word “concerto” is added. It refers to a piece of music for one or more solo instruments playing with an orchestra. The addition of the word “concerto” in the translation “Yuepu Drum Concerto” serves to clarify the nature of this traditional local opera form for readers in the target language. While “Yuepu Drum” alone might be somewhat perplexing to those unfamiliar with this cultural tradition, the inclusion of “concerto” provides a clearer context. By incorporating the term “concerto” into the translation, readers from the TL are able to better understand this traditional art form.

3.2.4. Omission

Omission refers to the translation strategy that some parts of the (cultural-loaded) word do not need to be rendered or translated at all. Only a part of it can accomplish the same cultural function in the TL.

Source text: 摇快船; Corresponding translation: boat racing

The custom of boat racing in Qingpu District was formed in the 1650s and has a history of more than 300 years. At that time, people used to go worshipping the Buddha at the Sanguantang Temple on Dianshan Lake during slack season and return from there to join the fair. On their way, they had to pass the Caogang River. To amuse themselves they would compete with each other. By and by, a custom of boat racing was formed.

The source text “摇快船” can be broken down into two parts: “摇”: This character means “row”; “快船”: This phrase literally translates to “fast boat” or “speedy vessel.”

In the example provided, the action of rowing and the adjective used to describe the boat is omitted. Instead, it symbolizes a cultural practice or activity related to boat racing. The corresponding translation, “boat racing,” succinctly captures the essence of the cultural practice without the need to explain the action of rowing (the boat). It allows the translation to retain the essence of the SL while

adapting it to a more simplified version that is easy to understand.

3.2.5. Free Translation

Free translation is a kind of translation that is faithful to the content of the original text without being bound by the style and form of the original text. After understanding the content of the original text, the translator expresses the content of the original text with the words most easily understood by the target language reader. This often breaks the original's sentence pattern and language style.

Source text: 独角戏; Corresponding translation: comic talk

Comic talk, or monologue, is a typical Shanghai *quyi* art form with Shanghai local flavors. It originated from a peddler's singing-playing song when selling pear syrup sweets at the end of the 1920s. To attract more people, the words that sang were usually quite funny and pleasing. At that time, there were some other *quyi* forms also with certain comical elements. Gradually all these forms merged together and developed into a special speaking singing art form – comic talk.

In the given example, which can be literally translated as “solo performance” or “monologue,” a free translation has been provided as “comic talk.” Such translation maintains the core idea of the original while infusing it with a flavor that resonates with the cultural context and the art form it represents. The word “comic” means “amusing and making you laugh”, carrying the essence of being amusing and evoking laughter, capturing the spirit of these performances that aim to entertain and bring joy to their audiences.

3.2.6. Annotation

Annotation refers to the supplement of necessary cultural background knowledge and explanation in the form of annotations. It is a unique but irreplaceable translation method in the translation of cultural-loaded words. Previous studies have already discussed that it can be used with transliteration and free translation to provide audiences from the TL with more detailed information to help them grasp the essence of the cultural loaded words. However, this paper holds the opinion that annotations can be added to any culture-loaded word the author needs for further explanation to describe or enhance the understanding of the word or phrase since it is meaningful to achieve the equivalence between SL and TL.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the application of functional equivalence theory in the Chinese-English translation of cultural-loaded words in Shanghai's intangible cultural heritage. By exploring various translation strategies such as literal translation, transliteration, free translation, and others, this paper has discussed how each method contributes to the conveying of cultural contexts. The case studies, particularly from the *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Shanghai Intangible Culture Heritage* have provided practical solutions. In addition, this paper highlights the intricate balance between maintaining cultural context while ensuring comprehensibility in the SL. It reinforces the notion that understanding and respecting the cultural context is as vital as linguistic proficiency in translation. While functional equivalence provides a robust framework, its application in translating intangible cultural heritage demands a sophisticated consideration from the translator. As cultural exchanges become more frequent, the need for the translation of intangible cultural heritage grows. This study contributes to this requirement by offering insights into the complexities of translating cultural-loaded words and translation strategies and methods to resolve the obstacles within, fostering a greater understanding of Shanghai's rich intangible cultural heritage. However, several limitations to this study need to be acknowledged. The major limitation is that this study still adheres to the translation strategies mentioned in previous studies, while a methodological translation strategy system ought to

be established. Furthermore, this study only focuses on the intangible cultural heritage mentioned in the *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Shanghai Intangible Culture Heritage*, lacking in other forms of intangible cultural heritage in Shanghai.

In conclusion, the field of translation, particularly in the context of intangible cultural heritage, is not just a linguistic task but a cultural bridge, requiring a deep understanding of both the SL and TL. The functional equivalence theory, while not without its limitations, offers a valuable guide in navigating this complex yet rewarding endeavor.

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