

A Study on the English Translation of Culture-Loaded Words in “Love in a Fallen City” from the Perspectives of Domestication and Foreignization

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Abstract. In the context of globalizing Chinese literature, translation serves as a crucial medium for cross-cultural dissemination. Eileen Chang’s fiction, with its blend of modern sensibility and traditional cultural motifs, holds a distinctive position in modern Chinese literary heritage. However, in the existing studies, the proportion of systematic processing of culture-loaded words in Chinese-English translation is very low. This study examines Kingsbury’s English version of *Love in a Fallen City*, classifying culture-loaded words into material and social categories, and analyzing them through domestication and foreignization. The results indicate that foreignization is more effective for culturally iconic terms to preserve authenticity, while domestication enhances readability for culturally opaque references. Kingsbury’s translation often employs a hybrid approach, occasionally supplemented with explanatory adjustments, to bridge cultural and communicative gaps. The study concludes that balancing different strategies in a context-sensitive manner best preserves cultural nuance while promoting cross-cultural engagement. These insights contribute to the translation of culturally dense literature, provide a new perspective on the translation of Eileen Chang’s works, and encourage further discussion on strategic negotiation in literary translation.

Keywords: domestication, foreignization, culture-loaded words, *Love in a Fallen City*

1. Introduction

Under the trend of globalization, Chinese literature is increasingly reaching global audiences, and translation, as a medium for the dissemination of literature, has become increasingly important. Eileen Chang’s “*Love in a Fallen City*” tells a shrewd love story amid war. It showcases the interweaving of traditional and modern Chinese culture through its unique narrative art, enriching the thematic connotations of modern Chinese literature. As the main English translator and researcher of Eileen Chang’s works, Karen S. Kingsbury has made substantial contributions to enable English readers to appreciate the value of translated literature while experiencing its heterogeneity. Karen S. Kingsbury translated “*Love in a Fallen City*”. Her translation was published in *The New York Review of Books*. It was at that time that Eileen Chang’s works began to gain wider international recognition.

Translation is the key for “Love in a Fallen City” to move from a national literature to a world literary classic. Culture-loaded words are an important component of literary translation. They are very important for spreading culture. This book is filled with many words rich in cultural connotations. They carry profound cultural connotations. The quality of these translations has a significant impact on overseas readers’ views of Eileen Chang’s works. A key question for translators is which strategy should be adopted to retain the cultural content of Chinese while expressing the author’s viewpoints clearly and smoothly. This issue therefore holds unique research value and significance.

Existing studies on Eileen Chang’s works have generally focused on three major aspects: comparisons between domestication and foreignization of literary translation, analyses of characters’ personalities and social backgrounds, and applications of various translation theories to works such as “Love in a Fallen City”. Fade Wang argues that foreignization is an inevitable trend in modern literary translation [1], while Gu Jiayue emphasizes that Chang’s fiction reflects the social context and cultural reconstruction of modern cities [2]. From a theoretical perspective, Qin Bin notes that translators of “Love in a Fallen City” often adopt strategies such as substitution, addition, omission, borrowing, and annotation [3]. However, these studies have seldom addressed the translation of culture-loaded words in a systematic manner, particularly within the context of “Love in a Fallen City”. This study therefore focuses on Kingsbury’s English translation of the novel, adopting a combined approach of literature review and case analysis to analyze the connection between translation strategies and culture-loaded words. By doing so, it aims to fill a noticeable gap in existing research and further illuminate the cultural and lexical nuances in Eileen Chang’s work. It seeks to enrich cross-linguistic lexical studies, stimulate further dialogue on comparative and transformational approaches to vocabulary between Chinese and English, provide new perspectives for discourse analysis in Eileen Chang’s literature, and it serves as a supplement for further research on translation.

2. Domestication and foreignization

The two translation methods of domestication and foreignization originated from the viewpoint mentioned by Schleiermacher in his book “On the Different Method of Translating”, namely, “there are two ways of translation: either bring the reader closer to the author or bring the author closer to the reader” [4]. Lawrence Venuti, a renowned American translator, formally proposed the definitions of domestication and foreignization in translation studies in his book “The Translator’s Invisibility”. Unlike traditional literal or free translation, which focuses on issues at the language level, domestication and foreignization pay more attention to translation issues at the cultural and aesthetic levels [5]. Domestication refers to localizing the source text by adopting expressions familiar to the target readers. The purpose is to ensure that readers experience the same fluency as when reading works originally written in their own language. At the same time, when expressing the abstract concepts unique to the original author’s cultural background in translation works, these concepts should be translated in ways comprehensible to target readers. For international readers who are not familiar with the cultural traditions of the text, domestication enhances clarity and resonance, helping international audiences convey culture-loaded words in an easy-to-understand and emotionally resonant way. Foreignization can reflect cultural diversity, especially some words with national cultural characteristics in the source language, enabling readers to understand the cultural features behind them when reading [6]. It is important to appropriately retain the language features and expressions of the source language to convey the original content to the target language readers, enhance authenticity and depth, and promote global interest and cultural understanding. Nida

believes that “what can be spoken in one language must also be spoken in another” [7]. He believes that humans have more commonalities than differences, and there exists a “common core” in human experience and expression. Nida’s translation theory mainly aims to demonstrate the existence of convertibility and translatability among different language symbols. At the same time, Nida also acknowledges that there is individuality in language, and language differences are mainly reflected in the forms of expression [7]. This translation theory argues that the mutual conversion of languages is not merely the translation of words and sentences; it requires the translator to understand and think about it. If all languages differ in form (which is precisely their essential difference), then in order to present the content, the form must naturally change. Therefore, in the practice of translation, domestication reflects the common core of human expression, while foreignization selectively retains the individuality in the language.

3. Types and analysis of culture-loaded words

Culture-loaded words are those that reflect the profound cultural heritage of a certain nation [8]. The key point in translating these words is to translate their deeper meanings. This is because in different cultural contexts, certain images or expressions may not have the same meaning or emotional color. If the imagery cannot be directly conveyed without altering its meaning or emotional tone, an interpretive strategy should be adopted. Therefore, when choosing translation strategies, it would be inappropriate to rigidly adhere to either domestication or foreignization. Consequently, translating the culture-loaded words in “Love in a Fallen City” entails a translational approach that employs both domestication and foreignization.

Different scholars have classified culture-loaded words differently. For example, Nida divided culture into five levels, namely ecological culture, material culture, social culture, religious culture and linguistic culture [9]. Scholarly classifications of culture-loaded words are multifaceted. Certain theorists have established a five-tier taxonomy from a cultural viewpoint, whereas others, operating from a linguistic framework, have categorized them according to verbal, referential, and pragmatic meaning. Concurrently, a further scholarly opinion contends that the scope of such terms must encompass culturally overlapped, parallel, blank, half-blank, and conflicting words. These classifications change due to the different focuses of their research, but the differences in classification methods will not affect the central theme of the research. This study roughly tallies the distribution of culture-loaded words in the discourse, classifies them into categories: material culture-loaded words and social culture-loaded words for research. It further examines the impact of the translation of them on cultural dissemination.

3.1. Material culture-loaded words

Manman Bi says the term “material culture-loaded words” refers to various physical items created by humans, including clothing, daily necessities, and everyday tools, etc. Such words reflect the material cultural achievements created by people in specific language and cultural groups [10]. The novel includes a number of material culture-loaded words. The following two examples illustrate this.

Eg1:屋里没有灯,影影绰绰的只看见珠罗纱帐子里,她母亲躺在红木大床上,缓缓挥动白团扇 [11]. No lamps were lit in there. Peering through the red gauze bed curtains in the darkness, Liusu could dimly see her mother lying on the big redwood bed, slowly waving a round white fan [12].

The terms “红木大床” (redwood bed), “珠罗纱帐子” (gauze bed curtains), and “白团扇” (round white fan) are cultural artifacts with distinct Chinese characteristics. The translation retains words

that are closer to English expressions such as “redwood bed”, “gauze bed curtains” and “round white fan”, facilitating comprehension among Western readers unfamiliar with Chinese cultural traditions. By directly translating the names of the items, the cultural characteristics of China are retained without being replaced by Western counterparts, preserving cultural distinctiveness. Karen S. Kingsbury maintained the effect of cultural foreignization by retaining the names and detailed descriptions of items with Chinese characteristics, enabling readers to perceive the distinctive Chinese cultural ambience.

Eg2:两旁垂着朱红对联,闪着金色寿字团花,一朵花托住一个墨汁淋漓的大字 [11]. There were two hanging scrolls with paired verses; the crimson paper of the scrolls was embossed with gold “longevity” characters, over which the verses had been inscribed in big, black strokes [12].

The expressions “朱红对联” (crimson couplet scrolls), “金色寿字团花” (gold longevity medallions), and “墨汁淋漓的大字” (large ink-dripping characters) all convey strong traditional Chinese cultural characteristics. Using expressions such as “hanging scrolls” and “paired verses” that are more in line with the English cultural background makes it easier for English readers. By retaining literal translations such as “longevity characters” and “crimson paper”, preserve the special symbols and colors of Chinese culture, and reflect foreignization. This translation strikes a balance between domestication and foreignization. By adjusting the expression to make the language conform to English habits (domestication), while retaining the literal translation of cultural symbols such as “longevity” and “red”, the effect of cultural foreignization has been enhanced, enabling readers to not only understand the content but also feel the rich Chinese cultural atmosphere.

3.2. Social culture-loaded words

According to Ruiyi An, social culture-loaded words involve aspects such as a nation’s political system, customs and habits, and historical allusions. Studying such culture-loaded words is helpful for understanding the local customs, living habits and social conditions of a nation during a specific period [13]. The novel also contains a number of social culture-loaded words. Three typical examples are given below.

Eg1:四奶奶早就预言过:“我们六姑奶奶这样的胡闹,眼见得七丫头的事是吹了.徐太太岂有不恼的” [11]. Fourth Mistress had already predicted: “After the scene Sixth Sister made, Seventh Sister’s chances are ruined. How could Mrs. Xu fail to be angry” [12].

The novel features a considerable number of kinship-related terms of address. In fact, both China and the West have these terms indicating kinship. Karen S. Kingsbury directly adopted the foreignization translation strategy and translated them as “Fourth Mistress, Sixth Sister, Seventh Sister”. This translation, by preserving kinship titles such as ‘Fourth Mistress,’ remains concise and faithful while also allowing readers to perceive the traditional Chinese family hierarchy.

Eg2:但是出盘缠带她到香港去,那可是所费不费.为什么徐太太凭空的要在她身上花这些 [11]? But paying Liusu’s fare and expenses and taking her to Hong Kong-Mrs. Xu would be shelling out a lot of money, and for what [12]?

“盘缠”, as a unique term in ancient Chinese society, represents travel expenses required for a journey. It is directly translated as “fare”, which uses domestication to simplify the expression. “would be shelling out a lot of money” uses an English colloquial idiom, domesticating the expression of “所费不费”, making it easier for English readers to understand the meaning of financial burden; “Mrs. Xu” adopts the form of respectful salutation in English and has been naturalized, reducing the sense of cultural distance. For expressions with subjective emotions like “凭空的要在她身上花这些钱”, the concise rendering “for what?” exemplifies domestication, which facilitates accessibility for target readers. Overall, through the organic combination of

domestication and foreignization strategies, this translation retains cultural connotations and takes into account the language habits of readers.

4. Challenges and solutions in translating culture-loaded words

Studying the cultural significance in culture-loaded words is somewhat challenging. Translators must take cultural background into account when translating these words. They need to take language rules and reader acceptance into consideration. To narrow the cultural gap, people need to use domestication and foreignization strategies with caution. Words with cultural connotations play a crucial role in conveying cultural identity. Translators need to accurately convey the source culture and translate it into a culture that people can understand and accept. Social culture-loaded words are prone to be influenced by cultural differences [14]. In different cultural backgrounds, readers have different views and understandings. Social culture-loaded words often contain unique cultural information. If translated directly, it may result in incomprehension or even misinterpretation on the part of target readers. For instance, the term “秀才(xiucaai)” in the book is a specific term left by China along with the continuous changes of social dynasties. If translated directly into English, it might make Western readers feel strange or even confused. Secondly, when different languages express the same cultural concepts, the commonly used words are different [15]. When translating, language habits should be taken into account. Using domestication can make the translation more natural, but excessive domestication may cause the original cultural characteristics to be lost. Foreignization can preserve cultural differences, but it may increase the difficulty of understanding. Culture-loaded words are important indicators of cultural identity [16]. How to handle these words in translation is related to the transmission and cognition of culture. Retaining the original cultural elements, that is, foreignization, helps to showcase the diversity of cultures, while domestication contributes to the integration and exchange of cultures. Therefore, translators must maintain a dynamic balance between the two strategies.

The language of “Love in a Fallen City” is diverse and rich in imagery. These elements are intertwined with cultural connotations and elegant styles, making the translation of cultural terms more complex. Take the previous example: “红木大床” (redwood bed) and “珠罗纱帐子” (gauze bed curtains), in the original text, convey the multi-level cultural meanings they carry through culturally distinctive items, which is not easy for the target readers to understand. This poses a major challenge for conveying the same aesthetic and emotional effects from English in translation. In this case, the translator must delve into the subtle differences in the context and reasonably adopt the translation strategy of free translation to make the implied meaning easy to understand.

Words from unique cultures, like “金色寿字团花” (gold longevity medallions), might lose poetic feel if translated word-for-word. They could also cause misunderstandings. Translators need to boost readers’ understanding while preserving the original’s aesthetic quality. They can use strategies such as finding similar images in the target culture or adding short annotations. In addition, attention should be paid to the original’s rhythm and lyricism, with flexible adjustments to sentence structure and wording to improve textual fluency and maintain an appropriate tone. Kingsbury focused on the rhythm of the dialogue and adjusted the translation of the inner monologue in her translation. This reflects an adaptive translation approach.

Ultimately, the translator must delve deeply into both cultures. They need to balance domestication and foreignization to ensure that the translation remains faithful to the original text and allows readers to read naturally. Choosing this balance is the key, as it helps translators overcome many challenges posed by texts rich in language and culture, such as *Love in a Fallen City*.

5. Conclusion

This paper groups the culture-loaded words in “Love in a Fallen City” into material and social types for study. It can also explore matching translation strategies from the perspectives of domestication and foreignization.

Words with strong cultural imprints need to be foreignized first in translation. Expressions that are hard to understand are more suitable for domestication. This enhances the readability for the target readers. Translators must balance two things: being faithful to the source culture and making the translation acceptable to the target readers. Translators also face many challenges, such as profound cultural differences and conceptual differences. When translating cultural images and implied meanings, these words are usually associated with metaphors of specific cultures, historical significance and descriptions of social conditions. They often have no direct equivalents in the target language. Translators need to bridge these gaps well, without oversimplification or distortion. They must flexibly adapt to the context, selectively explain, and occasionally annotate. This helps literary translation promote deeper cross-cultural communication.

This article emphasizes that translators must develop a thorough understanding of the cultural background of the original text. They should avoid rigid word-for-word translation. They should flexibly combine domestication and foreignization in order to convey the deep meaning of culture-loaded words. This research provides theoretical and practical ideas for the translation of classic literature. Further research is expected to be conducted in broader cultural and textual contexts. This helps translation maintain the authenticity of culture.

However, this study is confined to the research of a single literary work and lacks comparisons of other types of literary themes and language styles as well as translation among other languages. Future research should be extended to broader and more diverse areas, and a hybrid translation strategy should be adopted to enrich the understanding of culture-loaded words. The application of AI-assisted translation tools in this field also warrants further exploration.

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