

Translation Strategies for Culturally-Loaded Words: A Case Study of Chinese and Western Festival Terms

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Abstract. In the context of globalization, festivals serve as vital carriers of cultural transmission. Festival-related vocabulary often contains profound cultural connotations, but its translation faces challenges due to historical, religious, and social differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Although previous studies have examined the translation of culturally loaded terms, few have systematically compared Chinese and Western festival terms, leaving a noticeable gap in research. To address this gap, this paper investigates four representative festivals—Spring Festival and Qingming Festival from China, and Thanksgiving and Christmas from the West. By analyzing typical culturally loaded terms and their English-Chinese translations, the study applies the translation strategies of domestication, foreignization, and functional equivalence. It also considers the role of cultural context and translation purpose in strategy choice. The results show that literal translation alone often fails to convey cultural depth, while over-adaptation risks cultural distortion. A balanced approach – integrating transliteration, annotation and functional equivalence – has been proven most effective in protecting cultural identity and enhancing target readers’ understanding. This study highlights the importance of translating culture-specific terminology for festivals, providing insights to improve translation quality, to help protect cross-cultural heritage, to promote mutual understanding.

Keywords: Chinese and Western festivals, culturally-loaded words, translation strategies

1. Introduction

Culturally-loaded terms, especially those associated with traditional festivals, pose significant challenges for translators, because these words often carry values, customs, and symbolism not directly translated into the target language. Scholars emphasized that translating these terms needs not only linguistic accuracy but also cultural sensitivity. For instance, previous studies highlight how traditional Chinese cultural terms, when presented in multimodal contexts such as media subtitles, require a careful balance between literal fidelity and audience comprehension [1]. Similarly, research applying Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory to the translation of intangible cultural heritage terms advocates that translators give priority to conveying cultural intention rather than formal literalness [2]. In addition, the translation strategies of culturally-loaded terms in classical Chinese texts are studied and focused on linguistic form and cultural fidelity [3]. However, their study is confined to Chinese literature. This reveals a gap in comparative research that addresses

culturally-loaded terms across both Chinese and Western festivals—a gap this paper seeks to fill. Despite increasing attention to cultural translation, there remains a gap in studies on festival-specific terms, particularly when comparing Chinese festivals like Spring Festival and Qingming with Western ones like Thanksgiving and Christmas. This study chose culturally-loaded festival terms from two traditions as case studies. Through a case study approach and comparative analysis, this article aims to explore how translators balance cultural accuracy and readers' understanding. This study aims to propose a translation method that promotes mutual understanding and intercultural communication in an increasingly global context.

2. Culturally-loaded words in translation

2.1. Key features of culturally-loaded words

Words with cultural connotations are words that are closely related to local culture. People also call them culturally bound words. These words often appear in traditional customs, food, festivals or social life. They carry deep cultural meanings, many of which cannot be directly translated. Their meaning depends on historical context, social beliefs, and local traditions [1,4,5].

Culturally-loaded words can be divided into several categories based on their characteristics and functions. Religious terms relate to beliefs, rituals, or spiritual practices, such as "圣诞树" (shèngdànshù, 'Christmas tree') or "祭祖" (jìzǔ, 'ancestor worship'). A historical or political term refers to a concept related to a historical event or institution, such as "清明节" (qīngmíngjié, 'Qingming Festival'). Social and customary terms reflect social norms or everyday behavior, such as "红包" (hóngbāo, 'red envelope').

For example, the word "红" (hóng, 'red') is a red envelope with money. In Chinese culture, people give it to others as a blessing, usually during Spring Festival. The red color stands for good luck. The envelope is not just a container. It is a symbol of happiness and safety. In English, the term "red envelope" can be used; however, it fails to convey the underlying cultural significance.

Another example is "Christmas tree." In the West, people decorate trees during Christmas. The tree is more than just decoration. It represents family, joy, and tradition. A simple translation might miss the deeper ideas behind the term.

Culturally-loaded words are common in festivals. That is because festivals often express important values. During festivals, people show their emotions, beliefs, and traditions. Festivals are recognized as embodying a rich cultural memory [6]. Therefore, careful consideration is required when translating such culturally-loaded terms. It is necessary to protect their meaning and avoid changing the culture they carry.

2.2. Challenges in translating culturally-loaded words

Translating culturally-loaded words faces several challenges. Some terms are semantically untranslatable, lacking direct equivalents in the target language, such as "压岁钱" (yāsuìqián, 'Lucky Money or Red Envelope Money') or "感恩节" (gǎnēnjié, 'Thanksgiving'). Cultural mismatches may occur, as the symbolism of certain terms may be unfamiliar or absent in the target culture. Many words are highly context-dependent, requiring translators to understand specific social, ritual, or historical backgrounds.

Despite these difficulties, the study of culturally-loaded words still has unique academic value. It illustrates how language conveys cultural identity and how meaning is affected by historical and social factors [1]. Research in this field provides practical guidance for translators, strengthens

cross-cultural communication, and contributes to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage [2]. In brief, culturally-loaded words are both linguistic phenomena and cultural carriers, and their careful translation is crucial to promoting cross-cultural understanding.

3. Translation strategies and case studies of Chinese and Western festival terms

Translating culturally specific terms can be particularly challenging. There is no one way to fit every situation. Translators choose different methods relying on the situation. The target reader, the purpose of translation, and the place where the text will be used all matter. There are four common strategies. They are literal translation, free translation, transliteration with notes, and cultural adaptation. Each one has its use. Examples from both Chinese and Western festivals can be examined.

3.1. Literal translation

Literal translation is a straightforward approach that preserves the original form and seeks to maintain close alignment with the source text. It is sometimes referred to as formal equivalence translation, focusing on word-for-word or structure-for-structure fidelity [5]. This approach is especially suitable when the target audience has some familiarity with the source culture, or when maintaining formal accuracy is critical. However, literal translation may result in partial loss of meaning when significant cultural differences exist, as cultural connotations and symbolic significance may not be conveyed [6].

For instance, the Chinese term "春节" (chūnjié, 'Spring Festival') can be translated as "Spring Festival". In English, it becomes "Spring Festival." This translation conveys the seasonal aspect but omits the cultural connotations such as family reunion and rituals. However, it does not encompass all aspects of the term's cultural significance. In China, this holiday signifies not only family reunion and the welcoming of the new year but also bidding farewell to the old year and celebrating the transition between the two. The English term does not express these ideas.

In contrast, "thanksgiving" serves as another illustration, representing a Western festival. Its main idea is giving thanks. Families and friends gather to express gratitude for the blessings they have received throughout the year. The term can be translated into another language without much change, because the idea of giving thanks is universal around the world. Similarly, "Easter" can be translated as "复活节" (Fùhuójié, 'Easter'), directly conveying the core Christian concept of resurrection. In these cases, literal translation works effectively because the key idea behind the term is either widely understood or culturally neutral, allowing the target audience to grasp the meaning with minimal explanation [1,2].

However, literal translation has its limitations, especially when applied to Chinese traditional festivals. Many Chinese festival names, such as "端午节" (Duānwǔjié, 'Dragon Boat Festival') or "中秋节" (Zhōngqiūjié, 'Mid-Autumn Festival'), do not explicitly convey the rich cultural meanings embedded within them. The literal translation of "端午节" (Duānwǔjié, 'Dragon Boat Festival') as "Dragon Boat Festival" indicates only one aspect of the festival—the dragon boat races—while omitting underlying cultural significance such as commemorating Qu Yuan, paying respect to ancestors, and consuming zongzi. Similarly, "中秋节" (Zhōngqiūjié, 'Mid-Autumn Festival') translated as "Mid-Autumn Festival" retains the temporal reference to the moon but does not communicate the symbolic values of family reunion, moon worship, or harvest celebration [6,7].

These examples highlight that the effectiveness of literal translation is closely related to cultural universality and the transparency of the term's meaning. In Western cultures, many festival names

are self-explanatory and directly tied to an activity or emotion familiar across societies, making literal translation feasible. In contrast, Chinese festival names are often culturally dense and context-dependent, requiring translators to adopt additional strategies such as annotation or cultural explanation to convey the full significance [5,8]. Therefore, literal translation is advantageous for conveying clear, universal concepts but may fail to preserve deeper cultural connotations in cross-cultural contexts.

3.2. Free translation

Free translation does not follow the original words closely. It focuses on meaning. It aims to help readers to understand the corresponding meaning in their own culture.

For instance, the Chinese term "清明节" (qīngmíngjié, 'Qingming Festival') can be translated as "Tomb-Sweeping Day". This tells the reader what people do during the festival. However, it does not explain the cold food tradition (寒食, hánshí) or the mood of mourning. Some of the cultural meaning is lost.

Another example is the abbreviated form "Xmas (an abbreviation of 'Christmas')", derived from "Christmas". In academic contexts, the use of such abbreviations may weaken the religious connotations embedded in the original term. As a simplified linguistic form, it prioritizes brevity and convenience, yet simultaneously reflects the modern commercialization and secularization of the holiday. Nevertheless, some argue that this abbreviation fails to convey adequate respect for the tradition's religious origins.

Free translation helps when the goal is easy reading. It is common in children's books, news, or casual settings. But it may not show the full cultural background. Its advantage is that it makes the text accessible and natural for target readers, focusing on conveying the intended meaning rather than exact wording [1,4]. For example, "清明节" (qīngmíngjié, 'Qingming Festival') can be rendered as "Tomb-Sweeping Day" to highlight the main activity, and "端午节" (Duānwǔjié, 'Dragon Boat Festival') as "Dragon Boat Festival" to emphasize customs like boat races and eating zongzi.

However, free translation may omit deeper cultural or historical meanings. Chinese festival names often carry rich symbolism, so simplifying them risks losing context, whereas Western festivals like "Thanksgiving" or "Easter" are easier to translate freely because their names already reflect the main idea [2,5].

In short, free translation is suitable for terms where readability is prioritized, but culturally dense festivals may require supplementary explanation to preserve their significance [8,9].

3.3. Transliteration with annotation

This method uses the original sound of the word. Then it adds a short explanation. This helps readers learn the term and understand its meaning.

For example, "春节" can be rendered as "Chunjie" (Chinese Lunar New Year Festival). The sound stays close to the Chinese. The annotation specifies its timing and meaning. Compared with the literal translation "Spring Festival," which conveys the seasonal aspect but omits deeper cultural connotations such as family reunion and rituals, "Chunjie (Chinese Lunar New Year Festival)" retains the original pronunciation and provides an explanatory note, allowing readers to understand the festival's cultural significance. The advantage of this approach is that it preserves both linguistic and cultural identity, making it suitable for academic or cross-cultural contexts. The disadvantage is that it is longer and may interrupt reading flow, making it less concise than a simple literal translation. Overall, the choice depends on whether the priority is readability or cultural depth [1,7].

For "红包", we can write "hóngbāo (a traditional red envelope with money)." The note shows that the gift is for good luck. It also helps readers know that the envelope is part of tradition.

Similarly, in the case of Western festivals, transliteration with annotation can also help preserve cultural nuances. For example, "Thanksgiving" could be presented as "Thanksgiving (a U.S. festival held in late November to celebrate harvest and family reunion)." The annotation adds context about time and cultural meaning, especially for readers unfamiliar with the holiday. Without the note, the single word "Thanksgiving" may not convey its historical and cultural background, such as its origins among the early Puritans and their harvest celebrations in North America, and its core spirit was to be grateful for the harvest given by God, as well as to thank the Indians for their help.

This approach proves particularly effective in academic discourse or pedagogical contexts. According to Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory [8], translation should prioritize the equivalence of meaning and effect over a word-for-word literal correspondence. That is, the translation should allow the target reader to receive the same cultural and emotional impact as the source reader. In the case of "hóngbāo," using transliteration with annotation conveys both the term's form and its cultural significance, helping readers understand its symbolic meaning and function in Chinese New Year customs [2]. Likewise, the transliteration "Thanksgiving" with explanatory annotation ensures that readers not only recognize the English term but also grasp the festival's significance in American culture. Transliteration with notes helps readers understand new cultural ideas. It is especially useful when teaching or explaining cultural terms.

3.4. Cultural adaptation

Cultural adaptation aims to change the terms to something the readers already know. It replaces the original term with something similar in the target culture.

A good example is "Santa Claus." This character comes from Saint Nicholas. He was a religious figure. Over time, however, the image of Santa Claus has been reshaped through stories, advertisements, and popular media into a cheerful old man who brings gifts to children. Today, he is no longer limited to religious traditions but has become a cultural icon that represents kindness, generosity, and festive joy across many countries. This is a form of cultural adaptation because readers from different backgrounds can immediately recognize Santa Claus and link him with positive values, even if they are not familiar with his original history. In translation, using such a widely understood figure helps bridge cultural gaps and allows audiences to quickly grasp the intended meaning without feeling distant from the source culture.

Sometimes "元宵节" (yuánxiāojié, 'Lantern Festival') is called "Chinese Valentine's Day." This helps Western readers connect with the idea. But it may cause misunderstanding. Festival is about family and lights, not just love. In fact, there is a minor tradition that links the festival with love. In ancient times, young men and women would go out to admire the lanterns, which gave them a chance to meet and interact. Because of this, some people later associated the Lantern Festival with romance. However, this romantic aspect is much less important than the themes of reunion, family, and community celebration. The adaptation is simple but not always true to the original.

Adaptation helps readers feel familiar with the term, lowering cultural barriers and making foreign festivals easier to relate to. However, it carries significant risks: the original cultural meaning may be distorted or oversimplified, and readers might form incorrect associations with the source culture. In the case of Lantern Festival, calling it "Chinese Valentine's Day" emphasize romance but neglects traditional values like family reunion, ancestor respect, and light symbolism. Therefore, cultural adaptation should be applied selectively, primarily in contexts where

comprehension and relatability are prioritized over full cultural fidelity [6,9]. This highlights the trade-off between reader accessibility and cultural accuracy in cross-cultural translation.

4. Translation challenges and solutions for Chinese and Western festival term

4.1. Cultural conflict factors

Some terms carry meanings that cannot be translated easily, since festival expressions often reflect unique social practices and symbolic associations rather than neutral descriptions. For example, Chinese festivals are intertwined with agricultural cycles, family ethics, and commemorative rituals, while Western festivals are more closely tied to religious narratives and historical events. These cultural orientations not only determine the symbolic values attached to festival vocabulary but also explain why literal translation often fails to convey their full significance [10]. Such orientations shape how terms acquire meaning beyond their literal wording.

These four translation strategies have their own advantages and disadvantages: literal translation is concise but may ignore cultural depth; free translation can improve readability, but may simplify cultural connotations and cannot accurately convey the original meaning. For example, if "端午节" (Duānwǔjié, 'Dragon Boat Festival') is literally translated as "Duanwu Festival", the historical background commemorating Qu Yuan is ignored. Transliteration annotation preserves form and explains culture, but is longer; cultural adaptation can make the term familiar, but may distort the original meaning [1,2,6,7]. These examples show that translation strategies must address not only linguistic challenges but also the deep symbolic functions embedded within cultural traditions.

4.2. Proposed solutions

There are ways to address or reduce the problems caused by cultural differences in translation. Translators use several strategies to enhance clarity and preserve cultural meaning. One approach is compensation, which adds information that may be lost in literal translation. For example, "清明节" (qīngmíngjié, 'Qingming Festival') can be translated as "Tomb-Sweeping Day, a time to honor ancestors and eat cold food," where the additional note restores cultural and ritual details [2,6]. Another method is to investigate reader preferences. It is emphasized that translators should consider target audience comprehension and acceptability [10]. For instance, English speakers often prefer "Chinese New Year" over "Spring Festival" because it conveys the cultural context more clearly, even if it is less literal.

Footnotes and annotations are also useful, especially in academic or formal texts, as they allow for detailed cultural explanations without disrupting sentence flow. In multimedia contexts such as films or websites, images, videos, and sounds can function as visual or auditory annotations, providing immediate cultural context. The practice of giving out "红包" (hóngbāo, 'red envelope') during Spring Festival, for example, conveys cultural meaning more effectively than text alone [1].

Overall, the choice of translation strategy should consider the specific audience, the purpose of the translation, and the cultural density of the terminology. Combining literal translation with methods such as annotation or compensation can strike a balance between readability and cultural fidelity. This suggests that culturally loaded words require a flexible, context-sensitive approach to ensure accurate understanding and appropriate cultural delivery [7,9].

5. Conclusion

This study explores the translation of culturally-loaded words for Chinese and Western festivals, focusing on Spring Festival, Qingming Festival, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. The findings suggest that literal translations often fail to convey cultural depth, as many terms are rooted in unique historical traditions, symbolic rituals, and religious beliefs that cannot be fully expressed through direct lexical equivalence. In contrast, over-adaptation risks loss of cultural authenticity, as over-localization may erase the original cultural imagery and weaken its identity. Therefore, it is crucial to employ a balanced strategy that combines transliteration, annotation, and contextual adaptation. These findings underscore the need to preserve cultural symbolism while ensuring understanding among the target audience. The difference between Chinese and Western holiday terminology stems from their distinct cultural roots. Chinese festivals are heavily influenced by farming traditions, Confucian ethics, and ancestor worship, emphasizing reunion, continuity, and harmonious coexistence with nature. Western holidays, on the other hand, are influenced by Christian theology and key historical events, often emphasizing thanksgiving, redemption, and personal faith. These diverse origins make it difficult for certain symbolic meanings to transfer directly across languages and highlight the importance of translation strategies that consider cultural context. The contribution of this study lies in showing that the translation of holiday terms is both a linguistic and cultural act. By shedding light on how these terms embody values such as reunion and remembrance, the study provides practical guidance for translators and enriches the scholarly discourse on cultural communication. It emphasizes that effective translation not only fosters mutual understanding but also preserves cultural heritage. However, the scope of this study is limited as it considers only four festivals and a small number of terms. Future research should be extended to more diverse cultural contexts and empirical methods should be used to assess reader acceptance. Such work will deepen the understanding of culturally loaded term translation and further refine strategies for balancing fidelity and readability. Overall, the significance of this article lies in providing a targeted comparison of Chinese and Western holiday terms, shedding light on the cultural reasons behind their differences and providing practical insights for translation, while also contributing to a broader understanding of cultural symbolism.

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