

A STUDY ON THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF CULTURE-LOADED WORDS IN THE BOOK OF ORIGINS BASED ON CULTURAL TRANSLATION THEORY

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<https://doi.org/10.54922/IJEHSS.2024.0865>

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the translation of culture-loaded words in *The Book of Origins*, and analyzes it based on the cultural translation theory. In the context of globalization, the translation of ethnic literature works is increasingly valued, especially *The Book of Origins*, as a classic epic of the Yi ethnic group, its rich cultural connotations presenting challenges for translation. This paper first introduces the content and cultural significance of *The Book of Origins*, followed by an explanation of the theory of cultural translation and the definition of culture-loaded words. Through a case study analysis of ecological, material, social, religious, and linguistic culture-loaded words in *The Book of Origins*, the paper explores the application of translation strategies. The study shows that accurate translation of culture-loaded words not only helps to enhance the quality of cross-cultural communication, but also provides important support for promoting the dissemination of Chinese culture and fostering ethnic cultural identity.

Keywords: Culture-loaded Words; Cultural Translation Theory; *The Book Of Origins*.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's era, under the call to "deepen exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations, and promote Chinese culture to better reach the world," the translation of ethnic literary works has received increasing attention. The exchange and dissemination of ethnic literature contribute to the construction of the Chinese national community and align with the development requirements of promoting literature globally. *The Book of Origins* is a classic Yi creation epic circulated in the Yi ethnic areas of the Liangshan Mountain. The first two words of the Chinese title means ancient events or history, and the last two words means scripture or book in the Yi language. Therefore, *The Book of Origins* is a transliteration from Yi, meaning the book of history. The numerous culture-loaded words in *The Book of Origins* not only reflect its literary charm but also pose a significant challenge in the translation process. These words deeply reflect the cultural characteristics of the Yi regions, and their translation accuracy directly affects foreign readers' understanding and acceptance of the work. Studying culture-loaded words in ethnic minority literary works helps strengthen the construction of Chinese national culture and is of great significance for the dissemination of minority cultures.

1.1 The Content and Significance of *The Book of Origins*

The Book of Origins is a narrative epic of the Yi people that is primarily transmitted orally, with written records, and is prevalent in the northern dialect area of the Yi ethnic group. It reflects the Yi ancestors' understanding of nature, history, and society, documenting their cosmology, beliefs about the relationship between humans and nature, species origins, and social changes. This makes it a valuable historical, cultural, and literary heritage of the Yi people, rich in ethnic wisdom.

Spanning thousands of years of history, it continues to exist in the lives of the Yi people today. *The Book of Origins* includes narratives of creation, heroism, migration, warfare, and tribal. It primarily tells mythological tales of the creation of heaven and earth, the emergence of all beings, the origins of landscapes, the summoning of the sun and moon, the great flood, and the migrations of ethnic groups. It holds significant value for studying the early materialistic natural and world views of the Yi ancestors, as well as the formation and development of Yi society.

The Book of Origins is not only a literary work, but also an important part of the spiritual life of the Yi people. Its status in Yi society is equivalent to that of the *Bible* in the West. The practical application of *The Book of Origins* in Yi society is very extensive. It is not only a carrier of cultural inheritance, but also an indispensable part of religious ceremonies and festival celebrations, profoundly influencing the daily life and social activities of the Yi people.

The translation of minority ethnic classics serves as an important bridge for spreading Chinese culture and promoting cultural exchange. Unique regional characteristics, historical changes, and customary beliefs have nurtured the distinctive culture of the Yi people. The hardworking Yi people have preserved their cultural wisdom in writing, enabling its survival to the present. This not only provides valuable knowledge of Yi culture and history for Chinese civilization but also enriches the treasure trove of world civilization.

2. CULTURAL TRANSLATION THEORY AND CULTURE-LOADED WORDS

2.1 Cultural Translation Theory

Since the dawn of humanity, diverse cultures and civilizations have been transmitted across the world. In order to understand each other, people began to attempt language conversion, with translation serving as a means of communication that bridges different nations, civilizations, and cultures. Since the 1970s and 1980s, with the acceleration of globalization, exchanges between countries have become increasingly frequent, and the exchange of culture and information has intensified. In the process of cultural and informational dissemination, language differences have become increasingly prominent, leading translators to pay more attention to the cultural values reflected in translation activities. At this point, the role and status of translation activities have transformed, giving rise to cultural translation theory that emphasizes the cultural value of translation.

Susan Bassnett is a prominent figure in cultural translation theory. In her book *Translation, History and Culture* (BASSNETT & LEFEVERE, 1990), she presents cultural translation theory, which can be understood from four aspects. First, translation should be approached at the level of culture rather than discourse. Secondly, translation is a form of cultural communication activity. Thirdly, the goal of translation should be to achieve cultural functional equivalence. Finally, translation must meet the needs of the target language culture while also addressing the needs of different readers within a specific culture (Zhu, 2022).

In the context of globalization, the application of cultural translation theory has become an indispensable link in cross-cultural communication. Cultural translation theory emphasizes not only the conversion of language, but also the transmission and understanding of culture. The core of this theory lies in achieving cultural functional equivalence between the source language and the target language, i.e. preserving the original information while enabling the target language readers to experience the cultural background and connotations of the original work. With the continuous advancement of globalization, cultural translation theory will continue to play an important role in cross-cultural communication.

2.2 Culture-Loaded Words

Culture-loaded words are not only challenges in cultural exchange but also key elements of it. They reflect the civilization of a nation and hold a vital position in cultural exchange, their translation determines whether readers can accurately receive the original culture.

Liao (2000) believes that culture-loaded words reflect the unique ways of activities that a specific nation has gradually accumulated over a long historical process, distinguishing it from other nations; these words and phrases that reflect culturally specific phenomena are termed “culture-loaded words”. Sun and Han (2021) note that “culture-loaded words, also known as culturally specific words or cultural default words, refer to distinctive vocabulary that carries specific cultural connotations and folk customs (Including idioms and colloquial expressions).”

Culture-loaded words are products of a nation’s historical and civilizational development and are closely related to its geographical environment, social customs, and religious beliefs. Therefore, the same words or expressions can evoke different images or meanings among different ethnic groups. For translators, accurately uncovering the cultural values embedded in culture-loaded words within the original text is an unassailable responsibility. Moreover, the translation of culture-loaded words presents both challenges and opportunities for translators. On one hand, translators must have a thorough understanding of the cultural background behind these words. On the other hand, this also provides translators with an opportunity to showcase their translation skills and cultural adaptability. Through appropriate translation strategies, culture-loaded words can become effective tools for promoting cultural exchange and understanding. In summary, the definition of culture-loaded words encompasses multiple fields, including linguistics, translation studies, and cross-cultural communication. They play a crucial role in these fields. A deep understanding and study of these words not only help enhance the quality of cross-cultural communication but also mark the beginning of an in-depth exploration of a nation’s culture (Silang Danzhu, 2024).

Therefore, when translating culture-loaded words, translators need to comprehensively consider the cultural background, context, language structure and reader expectations of the source language and target language, and adopt appropriate translation strategies or translation methods to achieve effective cross-cultural communication.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF CULTURE-LOADED WORDS IN *THE BOOK OF ORIGINS*

The Book of Origins is a comprehensive epic, with creation myths, heroic tales, and migration paths forming its main body. The first half recounts the divine achievements of characters such as the god Ngeti Gunzy and Zhyge Alu in the creation myths. The second half is more closely related to real life, detailing the migrations, settlements in Liangshan, livelihoods, and conflicts of the Yi ancestors. Among these, the creation myths are the core content of the epic, and the main focus of this paper is the creation myths in *The Book of Origins*. The Chinese translation referenced in this paper was compiled and translated by Feng Yuanwei in 1960, while the English translation was collaboratively completed over ten years by American scholar Mark Bender and Yi-Han poet Aku Wuwu.

Newmark categorizes culture-loaded words into five types: (1) ecological culture-loaded words, (2) material culture-loaded words, (3) social culture-loaded words, (4) religious culture-loaded words, and (5) linguistic culture-loaded words (AKALIN, 2019). This paper selects several

typical cases from the novel and analyzes the specific translation strategies employed by the translators in conveying culture-loaded words based on Newmark's classification.

3.1 Ecological Culture-Loaded Words

According to Newmark (2004), ecological culture-loaded words include culturally specific items related to seasons, animals, plains, hills, mountains, and all geographical features belonging to a society (AKALIN, 2019). Due to geographic or natural environmental differences, many countries or ethnic groups have their own unique vocabulary, which can provide specific information to source language readers. Thus, during the translation process, translators should treat them as culture-loaded words and preserve the cultural connotations contained within.

Example 1

ST: 一天反着变, 变化极反常; 一天正面变, 变化似正常。

TT: Things changed one day in the dark of night, changed in the darkness of night; another day things changed in daytime, changed in the light of day.

Analysis: In this passage, the translator employs the method of free translation, rendering “反” as “the dark of night” and “正” as “daytime”, rather than opting for a literal translation. This choice is made in consideration of the natural ecological environment at the time, as well as the cultural backgrounds of different readers and the needs of cultural exchange. Therefore, the treatment of “正” and “反” emphasizes the chaotic state of the universe at that time even more, providing readers with a more intuitive cultural experience.

Example 2

ST: 吾则火施山

TT: Gulu Mountain

Analysis: “吾则火施山” is a term directly translated from the Yi language, and it is a word with distinctive local characteristics. Therefore, there is no equivalent term with the same cultural function in the target language. Considering the social and cultural background of the readers, the translator employed a foreignizing translation strategy here, translating the term through free translation. “Gulu” Village is a Yi settlement named for the sound of stones rolling down the cliff, which resembles a “gulu gulu” noise. Thus, “Gulu Mountain” retains some elements of Yi cultural characteristics in the translation process.

Example 3

ST: 土尔山

TT: Tulus Bbo'o Mountain

Analysis: “土尔山” is a culture-loaded word that is highly characteristic of the Yi ethnic group. There is no corresponding cultural vocabulary in the target language. Therefore, during the translation process, the translator employed a creative translation method, showcasing its unique ecological characteristics.

Example 4

ST: 还有四个铜铁球, 埋在大地上。

TT: Four gigantic copper and iron balls still lay in the human world below.

Analysis: Analyzing from its natural ecological background, at this time, the heavens and the earth had not yet been fully established. If the translator had directly translated “大地” here, it would have appeared contradictory. Here, the translator employed a free translation method,

skillfully interpreting “大地” as “the human world below”, which corresponds to the “下界” mentioned earlier, resulting in a more coherent meaning while also facilitating the reader’s understanding.

3.2 Material Culture-Loaded Words

According to Newmark, words related to houses, cities, towns, families, transportation, food, beverages, and clothing may reflect the primitive and unique culture of a society. These words reflect the unique ways of activity that a specific ethnic group has gradually accumulated over a long historical process, distinct from other ethnic groups. These words possess distinct national characteristics and constitute the essence of the national language. They also represent the most direct reflection of the national culture. He categorizes terms loaded with material culture into four themes: food, clothing, housing, and transportation (Newmark, 1988).

Example 5

ST: 会餐牛

TT: cows

Analysis: In the daily social interactions of the Yi people, it is common for them to express respect for guests by offering valuable food, which is also a traditional custom among the Yi people of Liangshan. In the Liangshan Yi region, yellow cattle are considered the most valuable livestock, and slaughtering a cow to entertain guests is regarded as the highest form of hospitality (Wu, 2023). Here, the fairies come for a feast, so it is natural to host them with high standards, which has become an important characteristic of Yi food culture. The Chinese translation here is “会餐牛”, and during the translation into English, the translator utilized a reduction strategy, omitting terms that would not be accepted in the target culture while ensuring that the reader’s understanding is not hindered.

Example 6

ST: 会餐酒

TT: wines

Analysis: The Yi people have had a tradition of drinking since ancient times. For the Yi people, wine is a symbol of goodness, and it embodies their wisdom in relation to their land and nature. The Chinese translation here is “会餐酒”, and the translator also employed a reduction technique in the English translation, rendering it as “wines”. Although it simplifies the cultural connotation of the original text, it also takes into account the cultural habits and acceptability of the target language readers.

3.3 Social Culture-Loaded Words

Social culture-loaded words refer to words that have distinct social customs characteristics of the times. Throughout the long course of history, the general populace has developed a unique social culture through various production, life, and practical experiences, which has led to the emergence of words that signify this social culture, and these words are known as social culture-loaded words.

Example 7

ST: 儒惹古达生于东, 署惹尔达生于西

TT: The place the sun rises, produced the spirit Ddebbu Sysse. The place the sun sets, produced the spirit Ddeshe Sysse.

Analysis: In the translation of this sentence, the translator employed a free translation method, rendering the terms “East” and “West” as “the place the sun rises” and “the place the sun sets”. The translator took into account the social context of the time and not use the exact terms corresponding to “东” and “西”, thus more effectively conveying the confusion and uncertainty of the world at that time to the readers.

Example 8

ST: 仙子

TT: spirits and immortals

Analysis: The term “仙子” originates from Chinese mythology, describing a woman of noble character, extraordinary wisdom, untainted purity, elegance, and remarkable abilities. In Yi culture, the fairy is referred to as “司惹” in the Yi language. She is neither a deity nor a ghost, but an idealized heroic figure with a human connection and superhuman abilities. Based on cultural translation theory, the translator chose vocabulary that is equivalent in cultural function during the translation, to convey the cultural information contained in the source language.

3.4 Religious Culture-Loaded Words

Religious culture-loaded words refer to cultural terms that involve aspects such as religious structures, religious relationships, religious norms, and religious phenomena (Yu & Deng, 2024). These terms encapsulate the unique religious and belief systems of a nation or ethnic group and represent an important part of the rich cultures of various ethnicities.

Example 9

ST: 恩体谷兹

TT: Ngeti Gunzy

Analysis: “恩体谷兹” is a deity in Yi culture, the supreme ruler who governs all affairs in heaven and on earth, and is part of its unique religious cultural concepts. Therefore, there is no equivalent term in the target language that carries the same cultural function. In the translation process, the translator employed a creative translation method for this term, which involves introducing a cultural-specific term not present in the original text, thereby retaining its original cultural characteristics. Additionally, the cultural terms for the cedar god “Ddebbu Sysse”, the cypress god “Ddeshe Sysse”, and the cloud god “Sysse Dihni” in this section also use the same translation method.

Example 10

ST: 一处打成坝，做放牛的地方。

TT: One place that was shaped into flatlands, became a bullfighting grounds.

Analysis: In the translation of this sentence, special attention should be paid to the translation of the term “放牛”. The Yi people are a nation that reveres and respects fire, and during the Torch Festival, the rituals of taking fire, worshiping fire, and sending fire all reflect the religious characteristics of the Yi culture. The Yi bullfighting competition is an important event of the Torch Festival and a tradition among the local ethnic minorities. Every year during the Torch Festival, people gather to participate in activities such as bullfighting, wrestling, moon jumping, and fire dancing to celebrate the arrival of the festival. The Yi bullfighting tradition has a history

of over 1,000 years. During the Torch Festival, the Spring Festival, or other significant celebratory events, people hold bullfighting competitions organized by village or town. In the translation, the translator changed the term“放牛” to “斗牛”, which better facilitates the dissemination of Yi culture.

3.5 Linguistic Culture-Loaded Words

Linguistic culture-loaded words refer to the unique characteristics of a particular language. Different countries or ethnic groups have developed their own unique linguistic cultures throughout their historical evolution, each having different language norms, modes of expression, and so on (Yu & Deng, 2024).

These words or expressions have unique cultural connotations and usage habits in one language, but may not have a direct equivalent in another language or have different cultural connotations and usage patterns. Linguistic culture-loaded words reflect a nation's language habits, thinking patterns, and cultural traditions, and are a direct manifestation of the nation's cultural uniqueness. They are also the product of the close integration of language and culture.

Example 11

ST: 天地的一代，混沌变成水。

TT: Shyzzyyy was the first generation to change.

Analysis: This section discusses the history of the evolution of heaven and earth, at this time, heaven, earth, stars, clouds, and so on had not yet formed, and the world existed in a state of complete chaos, filled with infinite possibilities and the unknown. The wise Yi people created their own language during the course of historical development. In the process of English translation, the translator employed a creative translation method, translating “混沌变成水” as “Shyzzyyy”, condensing a phrase into a single word rather than searching for corresponding vocabulary in the target language, thereby highlighting the uniqueness of Yi linguistic culture.

Example 12

ST: 天地的二代，地上雾蒙蒙。

TT: Yyhlihli was the second generation to change.

Analysis: In this sentence, the translator employs the same translation strategy as in the previous sentence, using the term “Yyhlihli” to convey the meaning of “地上雾蒙蒙”, which not only highlights the uniqueness of Yi linguistic culture but also provides readers with space for exploration and reflection.

Example 13

ST: 草长一片青。

TT: Grasses grew in nine places.

Analysis: In this sentence, the translator uses a free translation method, using “in nine places” to express the meaning of “一片”. After the translation, the translator made an explanation, “Here, as in other places, ‘nine’ means ‘many’”. In Chinese culture, “nine” not only has the meaning of other numerals to indicate the quantity and order of things, but also often means “many”. This belongs to the traditional language and culture of China. In the process of English translation, the translator chose to use this word to express the meaning of “many” in the original text, which is helpful for the exchange and dissemination of Chinese culture.

4. CONCLUSION

In today's context of globalization, cultural exchanges between countries are becoming increasingly close. Bassnett's theory of cultural translation aligns with the current trends of development. It can assist translators in better promoting the culture within the source language, thereby facilitating more equitable cultural exchanges with other countries or ethnic groups. *The Book of Origins* carries the historical culture of the Yi people, and the English translation of this text showcases China's positive national image, cultural traditions, and the wisdom of its people to the world. It enhances the discourse of Chinese culture on the international cultural communication stage, thereby promoting a better narrative of China's story and a more effective dissemination of China's voice.

The English translation of *The Book of Origins* is not only a transfer of language, but also a transmission of culture. Through precise and creative translation strategies or translation methods, translators can make the world better understand and appreciate the unique charm of Yi culture. Such intercultural dialogue not only enriches global cultural diversity, but also provides a platform for promoting mutual understanding and respect among different cultures.

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