

# A Study on the Translation of Culture loaded Words in *The Secret Garden* from the Perspective of Cultural Translation Theory

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## Abstract

Under the guidance of Susan·Bassnett's "cultural functional equivalence" theory, the cultural elements in Li Wenjun's translation of *The Secret Garden* were classified and some culturally loaded words were analyzed from the perspectives of ecology, language, material, society and religion. The results show that the translator's high cultural awareness and rich translation techniques can ensure that the literary works' translation achieves the maximum degree of cultural functional equivalence, while also being a basic guarantee for smooth communication between different cultures.

## Keywords

Cultural translation, *The Secret Garden* [1], Culture-loaded words, Translation strategies.

## 1. Introduction

Translation is a cross-cultural, interlingual communication activity that involves re-expressing the ideas and content of one language in another language using a specific language. Therefore, as a process of interlingual message conversion, translators not only need to master the pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and writing skills of both languages to transfer the original message accurately and appropriately, but also bear the responsibility of conveying the deep-rooted cultural elements of a nation that permeate all aspects of society to target language readers in a faithful and appropriate manner.

The large number of cultural elements including knowledge, experience, values, attitudes, religion and customs in literary works are the vibrant background of the works, thus they are also the direct means for readers to understand foreign cultures. Preserving these elements during translation helps to showcase the cultural features of the original work and enable target language readers to experience the authentic cultural atmosphere, thereby achieving the goal of promoting understanding and exchange between different cultures so that translated text can maintain the overall meaning and artistic charm of the work. Therefore, when translating literary works, translators should fully recognize the importance of cultural elements and adopt appropriate translation strategies to handle these elements.

This paper will analyze Li Wenjun's translation of culture-loaded words in *The Secret Garden* [2] based on Susan·Bassnett's cultural translation theory to summarize the excellent practices of translation in such an outstanding translation works meanwhile aiming at providing reference and guidance for more works of the same type.

## 2. Theories Review

### 2.1. Susan·Bassnett's Cultural Translation Perspective

Susan·Bassnett is a renowned translation scholar who emphasizes the importance of culture in the translation practice. She finds that because all language are closely connected to the social and cultural they are born with, translation is not only a conversion between languages, but

also an exchange between cultures. The core of the theory is to achieve cultural functional equivalence. "The translator has to take the question of interpretation into account in addition to the problem of selecting a TL phrase which will have a roughly similar meaning[3]." She pointed out "equivalence" does not mean complete similarity, but rather a equivalent situation that exists at different levels, such as lexical equivalence, grammatical structural equivalence and functional equivalence. So when dealing with cultural factors in translation, Bassnett advocates to achieve functional equivalence through cultural transformation.

## 2.2. Overview of Cultural Load Words

In 2000, Mona B. stated in "In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation" that "source language vocabulary may express a concept that is completely unknown in the target culture[4]. "Eugene·Nida believed that cultural loaded words refer to words that carry specific cultural connotations, which not only have meaning in terms of vocabulary, but also contain rich cultural background, historical traditions and social customs, reflecting unique concepts and things in the source language culture[5].

In China, Xu Guozhang first proposed the concept of "culturally loaded words" in "Culturally Loaded Words and English Language Teaching" in 1980[6]. In 2004, Liang Songlin believed that "the objective existence of cultural differences between English and Chinese is the fundamental reason for the limit of its feasibility of translation. Cultural differences not only affect the inherent meaning of the language itself, but also constrain the translator's translation[7]." In 2021, Sun Lin and Han Caihong pointed out that "culturally loaded words are also called cultural specific words or cultural implicit words, referring to feature words (including idioms and colloquial expressions) that carry certain specific cultural connotations and folk customs, often appearing in indigenous cultural works[8]."

Eugene·Nida also noticed the importance of cultural elements in translation. He made significant contributions to the definition and classification of culturally loaded words. In his *Language, Culture and Translation*, he divided the cultural elements involved in a text into five categories: ecological, material, social, religious and linguistic culture loaded words[9]. The classifications provide a reference template for the translation of cultural elements, thereby enhancing translation efficiency.

Overall, culture-loaded words are characteristic vocabulary formed by different ethnic groups over a long period of development, carrying unique cultural connotations of each ethnic group. These words not only have meaning in terms of lexical meaning, but also contain rich cultural backgrounds, historical traditions and social customs. So these words are difficult to find completely corresponding content in other cultures, which makes communication more difficult because they are also key focus for a literature translation. According to Susan·Bassnett's viewpoint, It's even impossible to achieve the highest level of functional equivalence theory all the time when translate culture-loaded words because the feelings of the translated readers are impossible completely consistent with those of the original readers. Therefore, translators should correctly understand the essence of the functional equivalence theory when translating so as to truly provide guidance for translation work instead of blindly pursuing absolute equivalence.

This paper will review Susan·Bassnett's theory of "cultural functional equivalence" as well as definition of culture-loaded words, after selecting some excellent translated text by Li Wenjun in *The Secret Garden* according to Eugene·Nida's five category principles, it will analyze his translation strategies and techniques adopted in different categories.

### 3. Translation of *The Secret Garden* and Its Cultural Loaded Words

*The Secret Garden* is a classic fairy tale that tells the story of a beautiful soul and the magic of nature. The book is full of childlike and romantic plots with a focus on describing the bright side of human nature. It has been rated as a "beloved novel of the British people" by the BBC. The excellent translations such as Li also made this work widely-known in China, so that his translation was edited multiple revisions and reprints since its publication. One of the reasons behind its popularity is partly related to his sharp cultural awareness and rich experiences in processing cultural element methods.

The novel mainly tells the story of Mary, a stubborn and isolated orphan who was born in India, adopted by her uncle and lived in her uncle's estate in Yorkshire, England. Guided by the mockingbird, Mary broke into a abandoned secret garden accidentally and met Dickon, a boy who could talk to small animals. They worked together to take care of the abandoned rose garden and "reviving" it gradually. At the same time, bit by bit Mary gradually opened up her heart and restored her pure and happy childlike nature.

From the background of the story to the protagonist's life scene, the work involves a lot of cultural information. Li maintains a discerning cultural awareness towards these cultural elements, so he adopts different translation strategies such as domestication and foreignization, and uses various translation methods to achieve cultural equivalence of the translated text to the source language based on their respective contexts, opening a window for Chinese children readers to understand exotic cultures.

#### 3.1. Ecological Culture-loaded Words

The vocabulary that reflects the cultural information carried by language and human social life in the ecosystem is designated as ecological culture-load word. They are the most direct reflection of various cultural factors with a collection of words, phrases or idioms that represent unique things in a certain culture. The extensive environmental descriptions in the novel not only pictures the background of plot and enhances the atmosphere of the story but also helps shape the character of images and implies the ecological situation and values of the society that the author and characters in the story at that time. Li mainly adopted literal translation, free translation, explanation or annotation to convey the cultural connotation of the original text. The research on ecological cultural load words covers three major categories: geography, climate and weather and animals and plants, etc.

Geography loaded word refers to objective and specific geographical locations and designated to names historically, including various natural and cultural environments related humans live, Li transliterated them directly, such as "India" for "印度", "England" for "英格兰", "Misselthwaite Manor" for "米塞尔斯韦特庄园" and "Yorkshire" for "约克郡", etc. Still, Li decoded the common words with its original meaning.

Ex. 1. S.T: **The moor** was hidden in **mist** when the morning came, and **the rain** had not stopped.

L.T: 清晨来临时, 荒原笼罩在雾中, 雨还没有停下来。

Like the environment, the author's description of weather in literary works can not only help to explain the background of the story, but also to highlight the protagonist's mood and foreshadow the development trend of the plot. Generally speaking, the feelings of sensitive Chinese readers towards weather descriptions are not significantly different from those of the original readers.

Ex. 2. S.T: On that first morning when **the sky** was **blue again**, Mary wakened very early. The sun was pouring **in slanting rays** through the blinds and there was something so joyous in the sight of it that she jumped out of bed and ran to the window. She drew up the blinds and opened the the whole world looked window itself and **a great waft of fresh, scented air** blew in upon her. **The moor** was blue and as if something Magic had happened to it.

在又一个天气转晴的第一个早晨，玛丽很早就醒了。太阳斜斜地从百叶窗里照进来，她看到了一种非常愉快的东西，于是跳下床，跑到窗前。她拉起百叶窗，打开窗户，一股清新的空气飘了进来，香味扑面而来。荒原是蓝色的，整个世界看起来好像发生了什么神奇的事情。

In the novel, innocent mind of a child got on well with animals and plants. The mockingbird is rarely seen in China, Li translated it directly as “知更鸟” in line with the original text to keep the exotic image. When corresponding images of animals and plants can be found in Chinese culture, Li provided the original explanations of these words as much as possible. For example, he translated “beds”, “hedges”, “holly”, “roses”, “foals”, “lambs” and “snake” as “花坛”, “树篱”, “冬青”, “玫瑰”, “马驹”, “小羊”, “小蛇”, and so on. In Li's text, he reproduced the pictures of the harmony and beauty of the original work to Chinese readers when children coexist harmoniously with small animals and plants.

Ex. 3. S.T: He knows all about **eggs** and **nests**, " Mary went on. " And he knows where **foxes** and **badgers** and **otters** live.

L.T: “他对鸟蛋和鸟巢了如指掌，” 玛丽接着说。“他知道狐狸、獾和水獭住在哪里”。

Ex. 4. S.T: " They ' re **bulbs** , " answered Martha. " Lots o ' spring flowers grow from ' em. Th ' very little ones are snowdrops an ' crocuses an ' th ' big ones are **narcissuses** an ' **jonquils** and **daffy** down **dillys**. Th ' biggest of all is **lilies** an ' **purple flags** .

L.T: “球茎” 玛莎回答。“好多春天开的花都是从球茎里长出来的，雪花莲和番红花，大的是水仙花，长寿花和汗水仙。最最大的就是百合花和紫菀蒲了”。

With his appropriate interpretation of these ecological images and atmosphere, especially the basic geographic features in a direct way, Li's translation reserved the exoticism of the story scenes, Chinese children readers thus learn the environmental circumstance changes slide by slide from India to Yorkshire of England.

### 3.2. Language Culture-loaded Words

E-C translation practice is inseparable from culture and the translator's understanding of the original meaning because it is not just a matter of language comprehension. Language is an integral part of culture and influenced straightly by culture and customs. Therefore, translators need to compare two cultures first, then following the steps of identifying their commonalities, understanding their differences and handling the relationship between translation and cultural customs well. Li used various translation methods, such as extension, substitution and addition and modification, etc., to adapt language cultural elements to the reading habits of the target language readers. Therefore, language in his translation embodied the following traits:

Firstly, particles, attached to a word or a sentence, is a typical feature of Chinese children works, which help to express a certain emotion feeling or complete the rhythm of speaking. Because children are apt to express their strong emotions or desires and curiosity, modal particle (“啊” “呢”，“嘛”，“吧” and “哦”) interjection (such as “啊”，“呀”，“哇”，etc.) and r-ending retroflexion (“儿”) are high-frequently used in children literature in Li's text under the rules of domestication.

Ex. 5. S.T: "There was someone crying—there was—there was!" she said to herself.

L.T: “是有人在哭嘛——是真的嘛——是真的嘛！”她喃喃自语道。

Ex. 6. S.T: "Nowt' o' th' soart!"

L.T: “没影的事儿！”

Ex. 7. S.T: "Just listen to them birds—th' world seems full of 'em—all whistlin' an' pipin'," he said.

L.T: “你就听听那些鸟儿的声吧——世界上哪儿没有鸟儿啊——全都在叽叽喳喳、咕呱咕呱地鸣唱。”他说。

Secondly, Li paid much more attention to the difference of role's speech and their status, so adaptation was skillfully and reasonably used in Li's text to revive the charm of the original text.

In Li's text, "my father", "my mother", "I", "thy Missus" and "wife" are accordingly translated as "俺爹", "俺娘", "俺", "你那口子" and "婆娘" etc. With lots of such appropriate adaptation, the Yorkshire dialect was vividly transferred to an accent of north village or town of China what's more, Li reserved the distinguished characters of Yorkshires for Chinese readers. Most notably, the style runs through Li's entire text to highlight Martha's kind and innocent personality, but also brings the original text closer to the readers.

### 3.3. Religious Culture-load Words

Religious and cultural loaded words refer to vocabulary that carries specific religious and cultural connotations which are endowed unique meanings and usage in different religious contexts. In the process of translation, the handling of religious and cultural loaded words is particularly challenging because they often carry profound cultural backgrounds and emotional elements while it is impossible to find some total equivalent words in target culture. In the novel, the author depicts scenes of children singing hymns together, showcasing their devout childlike innocence and local religious beliefs. Considering that Christianity is a unique religious culture in the world, Chinese children's readers may face completely unfamiliar concepts. Therefore, he adopted a strategy of formalization to maintain the uniqueness and differences of the source language culture, which promoted Chinese children readers' understanding of different religious cultures and avoided the impact of translation on the target language culture. Just as Lawrence Venuti pointed that alienation translation can highlight the differences in style, culture, and other aspects of the original text, thereby expressing the differences between language and culture in translation[10].

Here are some examples:

Ex. 8. S.T: "I never seed no sense in th' **Doxology** afore," .....

L.T: "我原先从来没觉得这《**荣耀颂**》有啥了不起的。"

The Christian anthem "Doxology" was first called "三一颂" by traditional Chinese Christians, but was later replaced by the "荣耀颂", Li adopted "Doxology" as a more familiar name of "荣耀颂" to Chinese readers with the technique of established equivalent,

Ex. 9. S.T: " It will be like **sitting** in a sort of temple , " said Colin.

L.T: "就跟在庙里**打坐**一样"科林说。

Li decoded "sitting" as "打坐" with the context of "in a sort of temple" with translation technique of adaptation. "打坐" is familiar to Chinese readers, originated from Taoism and refers to religious believers sitting in silence, relaxing themselves and engaging in insightful reflection. Li's translation not only brought the original text closer to Chinese reader, but also invited the reader's imagination, rendering what the main characters consider a "holly" atmosphere.

Ex. 10. S.T: " I once heard an officer in India tell my mother that there were **fakirs** who said **words** over and over thousands of times , "said Mary.

L.T: 我曾听到在印度的一个军官告诉我妈妈, 有些**苦行僧**, 念**偈语**要念上千遍呢。玛丽说道。  
"苦行僧" refers to a person who lives a life of self restraint, self-denial and mortification in some early Indian religions. In China, people sometimes also address people who practice hard in Buddhism as "苦行僧". Therefore, the image of "苦行僧" is not only similar to the original image, but also more familiar to Chinese readers and more suitable for their religious awareness and cognitive level.

Just like most translators, Li held a cautious and rigorous attitude towards religious and cultural loaded words. The alienation translation strategy he adopted allowed Chinese children readers to understand the religion in the story, promoting cross-cultural communication meanwhile preserving the cultural characteristics of the original text while avoiding cultural loss and excessive impact on the target and culture.

### 3.4. Material Culture-load Words

Material cultural load words are associated with specific material cultures, which often possess strong local cultural characteristics, so they are the embodiment of unique material cultural achievements formed by a certain ethnic group or region in the long-term development process. This type of vocabulary reflects the material cultural characteristics created by people within a certain language and cultural group. For material words that can fully find corresponding images in Chinese, such as “tea trays”, “beds”, “armchairs”, “shovels”, “bread”, “butter” “hunchback” etc. for “茶盘”, “花圃”, “扶手椅”, “铲子”, “面包” and “黄油”, “驼背” etc., Li translated them literally into corresponding Chinese vocabulary. For example:

Ex. 11. S.T: ...was set with a breakfast of **home - made bread** and **fresh butter, snow - white eggs, raspberry jam** and **clotted cream**.

L.T: 桌子上已经摆满了早餐: 家制面包、新鲜黄油、雪白的鸡蛋, 山莓子酱和凝乳。

Ex. 12. S.T:...I do wish **the slices of ham** were thicker, and one **muffin** each is not enough for any one."

L.T:

“我真希望,”科林吃完了还没尽兴, “火腿片能再厚一些, 一个人只吃一个松饼, 胃口再小的也会觉得不够呀。”

On the other hand, because readers from different cultural backgrounds have different perceptions and emotions towards the culture represented by material culture loaded words, it is difficult to achieve the highest level of functional equivalence in the translation of material culture loaded words, therefore it is no way to arouse the same feelings of the translated readers that the original readers acquired since their birth. Due to the modern Chinese children readers have accumulated a lot of basic knowledge of English material culture, Li took cultural adaptation strategies with cultural transfer as the strategy, at interval he adopted various translation methods such as interpretation, literal translation with annotations and transliteration with additions to achieve the goal of functional orientation of such cultural elements.

The text involves couples of such examples:

Ex. 13. S.T: ..... an' my father only gets **sixteen shilling** a week. I can tell you my mother's put to it to get porridge for 'em all.

L.T: ....., 可俺爹每星期才挣十六个先令。俺娘没辙, 只好让大家喝粥。

Ex. 14. S.T: A **brougham** stood on the road before the little outside platform. Mary saw that it was a smart carriage and that it was a smart footman who helped her in.

L.T:

一辆轿式马车停靠在靠外边的小月台侧边的马路上。玛丽看到那是一辆漂亮的马车, 扶她上车的那个男仆也长得蛮帅气。

The “brougham” is a kind of covered wagon, a very common transposition deceive in British while may be unfamiliar to Chinese readers. By adaptation technique Li translated it as “轿式马车” with the domesticating strategy to break the cultural barrier in line with the similar element with cultural background of the Qing Dynasty.

### 3.5. Sociocultural loaded words

Sociocultural load words reflect the unique way of life formed by a certain culture in a specific historical background and development process. These words are usually closely related to specific cultural backgrounds, ethnic characteristics, customs and language features reflecting in kinship terms, colors, history, measurement units, festivals and social customs. Because it is often difficult to find a completely equivalent expression in translation between different cultures, the translation process may encounter significant challenges. When the translator adopts domestication can make the translation more in line with the habits of the target

language readers, it may lose the cultural characteristics of the original text; On the other hand, adopting the principle of alienation can preserve the cultural characteristics of the original text may increase the difficulty for readers to understand in the same way. In order to help Chinese children readers better understand the meaning of these cultural loaded words, Li used cultural compensation as a strategy, mingling with some translation methods such as substitution, literal translation plus extension and literal translation plus addition to convey the connotation and meaning of cultural elements in the source language.

Here are several examples to illustrate:

Ex. 15. S.T: Once in India I saw a boy who was a **Rajah**. He had rubies and emeralds and diamonds stuck all over him.

L.T: 在印度时我见到过一个男孩，他是一个**王爷**。他全身缀满了红宝石、绿宝石和钻石。

In order to address the cultural gap of "Rajah", Li applied the technique of generalization and flexibly to translated it as "王爷" to fit the status of a wealthy and prestigious India figure because "Rajah" is unfamiliar to Chinese readers while "王爷" is well known to Chinese readers with Qing Dynasty context. Accordingly "mansion" "manor" were adapted as "府" and "宅子" to conform social context of the story.

On the other hand, Li did not forcefully cover all the original information with Chinese cultural context, so many information in his text still maintained the social culture flavor of the source text. For example he adapted "salaam" as "额首礼" in line with the etiquette custom of Qing Dynasty context while transliterated "Buckingham Palace" "白金汉宫" with annotation "\*英国君主的伦敦官邸"; Still he translated "in a High Priest tone" as "大主教的腔调", and "dervishes" for "苦行僧" to reserve the religious setting.

Ex. 16. S.T: " My word ! " he said , " he ' s got a fine lordly way with him , hasn ' t he ? You ' d think he was a whole **Royal Family** rolled into one - - **Prince Consort** and all . "

L.T:

“我发誓！”

他说，“他贵族架子还真够大啊，是不是呀？他认为他就是整个**王室**的全权代表呢——就像煞**亲王**似的①。”

①指女王丈夫，小说中描写的时代由维多利亚女王执政，她的丈夫是艾伯特亲王。

Sociocultural loaded words is particularly important in the translation of literary works because they often carry abundant cultural connotations and historical backgrounds, which directly affect whether the target language readers can correctly understand and appreciate the works. Li took into account of multiple aspects such as language accuracy, consistency in style and reproduction of literary effects in his text. At the same time, his profound language skills and encyclopedic knowledge framework enabled him to flexibly apply various translation strategies, such as literal translation, free translation, transliteration, annotation, etc., to convey equivalent information of source text to target readers.

## 4. Conclusion

To sum up, translation does not mean a simple decoding-reconstruction but a process of cultural exchange. From Li's translation, it is easy to conclude that culture should better be translated as the basic unit of literature instead of being confined to the discourse level; Still, translation of literal works should aim at achieving cultural functional equivalence between source texts and target texts without worrying the description of the source text too much; Another approach worth mentioning is that translation has different principles and norms in different periods so as to meet the advanced demands of new era in a specific culture.

Susan Bassnett's cultural translation theory provides guiding principles for the translation of literary works, while Eugene A. Nida's cultural classification allows researchers to categorize and analyze the numerous cultural elements that run through novels. Through the sorting and

analysis of the five cultural elements in the novel *The Secret Garden*, the research found that Li had already demonstrated a strong cultural awareness in the process of translating *The Secret Garden*. By adopting different translation strategies such as domestication and foreignization and using various translation methods such as free translation, imitation translation, annotation, transliteration and addition domestication, etc. to achieve foreignization, he finally achieved the goal of "cultural functional equivalence" in the translation. It is precisely because of the translator's cultural awareness and translation techniques that the Chinese text of *The Secret Garden* opened up a window for Chinese children to observe the world of British aristocratic children to the greatest extent; on the other hand his translation has also guided countless Chinese readers reflecting the true happiness of childhood in the novel, sharing their friendship, kindness and joy.

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