

Research on International Communication Translation Strategies of Culture-Loaded Words in Xiangxi Ethnic Minority Culture

Jing Yin^{1,*}

¹School of Foreign Languages, Hengyang Normal University, Hengyang 421001, China

*Corresponding author Email: yinjing@hynu.edu.cn

Abstract

In the context of the “Going Out” strategy of Chinese culture, the international communication of ethnic minority cultures has garnered increasing attention. As vital carriers of ethnic culture, the translation quality of culture-loaded words directly influences the effectiveness of communication. Focusing on the Miao, Dong, and Tujia cultures in the Xiangxi (Western Hunan) region, this paper classifies culture-loaded words based on bilingual texts from scenic spots, government publicity materials, and tourism corpora. Guided by Skopos theory, it analyzes corresponding translation strategies. The study finds significant variations in strategies across different categories: geographical environment words primarily employ transliteration and literal translation; customs and habits favor “literal translation plus explanation”; while religious beliefs and ways of thinking rely heavily on explanatory translation and functional rewriting. Furthermore, the selection of translation strategies is constrained by factors such as culture-loading intensity, cultural type attributes, communicative purposes, and audience receptivity. Based on these findings, this paper constructs an explanatory framework for selecting translation strategies for culture-loaded words, aiming to provide theoretical support and practical reference for the international communication of China’s ethnic minority cultures.

Keywords

Culture-loaded words; International communication translation; Skopos theory; Translation strategies; Ethnic minority culture.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary era of globalization, the “Going Out” strategy of Chinese culture has transitioned from a localized initiative to a significant pillar of China’s international soft power discourse. Within this strategic framework, ethnic minority cultures have emerged as indispensable components of the nation’s cultural tapestry, offering a unique semiotic richness that appeals to a global audience. The Xiangxi (Western Hunan) region, characterized by its profound historical isolation and subsequent preservation of tradition, serves as a quintessential microcosm of this diversity. As a multi-ethnic sanctuary for the Miao, Tujia, and Dong peoples, Xiangxi possesses an intricate array of cultural forms—ranging from the ethereal natural landscapes of Wulingyuan to the esoteric religious rituals and complex social hierarchies embedded in local customs. However, the successful cross-cultural transmission of these indigenous elements hinges almost entirely on the linguistic bridge of translation. The primary bottleneck in this process remains the treatment of culture-loaded words, which act as the concentrated essence of a people’s worldview.

Culture-loaded words are not merely lexical units; they are the linguistic crystallization of a specific ethnic group’s historical trajectory, ecological environment, and cognitive habits. According to Liao (2000), these terms encapsulate unique cultural connotations that often lack

direct semantic equivalents in the target language[1], creating what Newmark (1988) famously identified as “cultural gaps”[2]. In the specific context of Xiangxi’s ethnic minorities, these words perform a dual function: they serve a referential purpose by naming objects or rituals, but more importantly, they act as vessels for cultural identity and collective memory. Consequently, the translation of such terms is fraught with semiotic risk. An oversimplified translation may lead to “cultural thinning”, where the exotic charm and profound meaning of the original text are bleached away, while an overly literal translation may result in “cognitive dissonance” or total misinterpretation by the international audience.

Despite the growing body of literature on international communication, existing studies on ethnic minority terminology have remained largely descriptive or anecdotal. Many researchers have explored culture-loaded words through the narrow lens of basic translation techniques [3], yet there is a discernible lack of systematicity and robust theoretical modeling to explain the “why” behind strategic choices. To address this, a shift toward a functionalist perspective is required. According to Skopos Theory, translation is a teleological activity where the “purpose” (Skopos) of the target text dictates the translation methods[4]. This approach prioritizes the function of the translated text within the target culture, seeking to achieve both intertextual coherence and pragmatic acceptability[5]. In the high-stakes arena of international publicity (waixuan), the translator must navigate the delicate tension between “foreignization”, preserving the authentic “otherness” of Xiangxi, and “Domestication”, ensuring the text is digestible for a Western reader.

Based on the necessity for a more structured approach, this paper provides a comprehensive analysis of culture-loaded words within the Xiangxi ethnic minority context. By categorizing these terms into distinct domains—such as geographical, religious, and social, and applying the principles of Skopos Theory, this study seeks to uncover the underlying selection mechanisms that govern successful translation. Ultimately, this research aims to construct an integrated explanatory framework that serves as a theoretical and practical reference, ensuring that the “voice” of Xiangxi is not just heard, but accurately understood on the global stage.

2. Classification and Corpus Sources of Culture-Loaded Words in Xiangxi

This part mainly introduces the definition of culture-loaded words and the classification framework, the classification of culture-loaded words in Xiangxi, and corpus construction and methodology.

2.1. Conceptual Definition and Classification Framework

“Culture-loaded words” (also known as cultural lexemes) are linguistic units that encapsulate the specific historical trajectories, ecological adaptations, and value systems of a particular ethnic group. As Liao posits, these terms are the “living fossils” of a culture, carrying meanings that are often deeply embedded in the collective subconscious of the community[1]. In the context of Xiangxi, a region defined by the intricate coexistence of the Miao, Tujia, and Dong nationalities, these words act as semiotic markers that distinguish the local identity from the Han majority.

To systematically analyze these terms, this paper adopts a multi-dimensional taxonomy based on the “dimension of cultural manifestation”. This framework is not merely a list but a structural hierarchy that reflects the progression from “tangible material culture” to “intangible spiritual consciousness”. By organizing culture-loaded words into five distinct categories, we can better observe how the degree of cultural “opacity” or “loading intensity” increases as we move from external physical entities to internal psychological structures. This progression is crucial because it directly dictates the translator's shift from formal correspondence to dynamic, explanatory reconstruction.

2.2. Detailed Categories

The five categories are defined as follows to ensure comprehensive coverage of the Xiangxi cultural landscape:

Geographical Environment: This category serves as the spatial foundation of Xiangxi culture. It includes unique toponyms and natural landmarks that are often tied to ethnic origin myths or specific topographical features, such as “芙蓉镇” (Furong Town) and “老司城” (Laosi City). These words possess high referentiality but also carry “place-bound” historical weight.

Historical and Folk Culture: This tier covers the chronological dimension of the region, encompassing historical figures, traditional art forms, and ethnic festivals. Examples include “侗戏” (Dong Opera) and “峰崖歌会” (Fengya Cliff Song Festival). These terms function as the cultural memory of the Miao and Dong peoples, preserving their historical ethos.

Customs and Habits: These words reflect the “rhythm of daily life”. This category includes clothing (e.g., “百褶裙”), culinary traditions (e.g., “花糯米饭”), and social etiquette. These are the most visible markers of ethnic distinction in tourism and are highly frequent in promotional materials.

Religious Beliefs: Moving into the spiritual realm, this category involves the esoteric language of indigenous belief systems, such as Nuoism and ancestor worship. Terms like “祭萨” or “鬼师” represent a high degree of cultural specificity, often lacking any direct functional equivalent in Western secular or Judeo-Christian frameworks.

Ways of Thinking and Social Values: The most abstract category, it reflects the psychological structure and social ethics of Xiangxi’s minorities. Concepts such as “哭嫁” or “不落夫家” are not just “customs” but manifestations of specific kinship systems and gender roles that require deep cultural decoding during translation.

2.3. Corpus Construction and Methodology

The reliability of this study is anchored in a diverse and representative multimodal corpus. The data collection process prioritized “authenticity” and “communicative relevance”, resulting in a corpus derived from four primary channels. Firstly, Official Scenic Bilingual Texts: High-quality descriptions from AAAA and AAAAA-rated scenic spots (e.g., Phoenix Ancient Town, Dehang Miao Village) provide standardized translation samples. Thirdly, Government Publicity and Policy Materials: Texts from the Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture government websites and “International Communication” brochures offer insight into how the state seeks to “brand” minority culture for a global audience. Fourthly, Tourism Industry Media: This includes brochures from travel agencies and digital content from platforms like TripAdvisor or local tourism apps, reflecting the “commercialized” translation of culture. Fifthly, Academic and Digital Archives: Online bilingual databases and scholarly monographs on Xiangxi folklore were consulted to ensure the accuracy of the cultural definitions provided in the analysis.

The corpus was filtered using two criteria: Typicality (the word must be central to the identity of at least one Xiangxi ethnic group) and Representativeness (the word must appear in at least two different types of publicity media). This dual-filter approach ensures that the analysis focuses on terms that international visitors are most likely to encounter, thereby providing practical utility for future translation endeavors.

3. Analysis of Translation Strategies for Culture-Loaded Words

The translation of culture-loaded words is a process of balancing linguistic precision with cultural accessibility. In the context of Xiangxi’s ethnic minority publicity, this requires a tiered approach where the strategy shifts according to the semantic weight and functional role of the term.

3.1. Geographical Environment: Prioritizing Referentiality and Spatial Identification

Geographical culture-loaded words primarily function as spatial markers. In the semiotic landscape of Xiangxi, these terms possess a high degree of "proper noun" density, where their primary communicative value lies in unambiguous identification rather than deep conceptual decoding. Consequently, the prevailing strategy is a combination of transliteration and literal translation, ensuring that international tourists can align the translated text with local signage and maps.

For instance, iconic landmarks such as “芙蓉镇” (Furong Town), “老司城” (Laosi City), and “里耶古城” (Liye Ancient Town) utilize direct translation to preserve the administrative and historical status of these sites. However, the limitation of pure transliteration emerges when the geographical term also describes a unique architectural or geological phenomenon. A prominent example is “吊脚楼”. If rendered simply as “Diaojiolou”, the target audience is left with a phonetic shell devoid of visual or structural meaning. By employing a compound strategy—“吊脚楼” (Diaojiolou, traditional stilted wooden houses)—the translator satisfies the “Skopos rule” by providing both the local cultural label (foreignization) and a functional description (domestication). This allows the reader to immediately grasp the architectural adaptation to the mountainous terrain of Western Hunan, facilitating a seamless transition from linguistic recognition to mental visualization.

3.2. Customs and Habits: Contextual Expansion and Information Conservation

The category of customs and habits represents the most visceral and phenomenologically rich aspect of the Xiangxi experience. These words describe clothing, cuisine, and social behaviors that are often “invisible” in the target culture’s conceptual framework. Literal translation here is frequently a source of pragmatic failure, as it fails to capture the underlying social significance or the “behavioral logic” of the custom.

Take the term “踩花山节” as an example. A minimalist translation such as “Huashan Festival” is semiotically hollow for a Western audience. To achieve information conservation, the translator must expand the context: “踩花山节” (Miao Huashan Festival, a traditional celebration featuring singing, dancing, and courtship). This expansion clarifies the ethnic agency (Miao), the activities involved, and the social function (courtship), which is crucial for a comprehensive understanding. Similarly, the translation of “牛角酒” requires more than a word-for-word swap. Rendering it as (rice wine served in ox-horn-shaped containers) transforms a potentially confusing literal image into a vivid cultural scene. The essence of this strategy lies in bridging the “cultural gap” by providing the missing context that allows the reader to perceive the object within its original social ecosystem.

3.3. Religious Beliefs: Recontextualization through Functional Equivalence

Religious and ritualistic terms represent the “high-load” zone of culture-loaded words. These terms are often rooted in Animism, Shamanism, or local ancestral cults that have no direct lineage in Western religious history. To translate these terms, one must engage in a process of cultural recontextualization, moving beyond the word itself to find a functional equivalent that resonates with the target audience’s cognitive schema.

Terms like “祭萨” (sacrificial ritual to ancestral spirits), “跳丧鼓” (funeral drum dance ritual), and “傩戏” (Nuo ritual performance, an exorcism-related folk drama) demonstrate the necessity of adding descriptive keywords such as “ritual”, “exorcism”, or “spirit”. These additions serve as an epistemic bridge, placing the exotic term within a broader, recognizable category of human religious behavior. Under the “coherence rule” of Skopos Theory, the translation must be internally intelligible. By framing “傩戏” not just as a “play” but as an

“exorcism-related drama”, the translator successfully conveys the spiritual gravity of the performance, ensuring that the target audience views the event through a lens of respect rather than mere curiosity.

3.4. Historical Culture: Identity Reinforcement and Symbolic Branding

Historical culture-loaded words are the repositories of ethnic memory. In the arena of international publicity, these words function as cultural brands that differentiate the Xiangxi minorities from a monolithic “Chinese” identity. The translation strategy here focuses on identity reinforcement, often utilizing a “literal translation framework + cultural reinforcement” model.

When translating “侗戏” as (Dong ethnic opera) or “舍巴歌” as (traditional Tujia ritual songs), the inclusion of terms like “ethnic”, “traditional”, or “Tujia” serves to highlight the ethno-cultural distinction. For “峰崖歌会” (Fengya Cliff Singing Festival, a traditional Dong singing gathering), the translation preserves the unique spatial image of the “cliff” while immediately clarifying the ethnic ownership and the nature of the event. This approach ensures that the specific “cultural DNA” of the Dong or Tujia people is not lost in a generic translation, effectively reconstructing the ethnic identity for a global audience and enhancing the “symbolic capital” of Xiangxi’s historical heritage.

3.5. Ways of Thinking: Deep Hermeneutics and Cultural Conversion

At the deepest level of the cultural hierarchy lie the ways of thinking, the “unspoken rules” and psychological structures of a society. These culture-loaded words are often highly implicit and socially contingent, making them the most difficult to translate. Simple linguistic conversion is impossible; instead, the translator must act as a cultural hermeneut (interpreter), converting implicit values into explicit explanations.

Consider the term “哭嫁”. A literal rendering like “crying at a wedding” might imply tragedy or unhappiness to a Western reader. However, by translating it as (bridal lamentation ritual), the translator elevates the act from a personal emotion to a formal, institutionalized rite of passage. Similarly, “游方” (traditional courtship travel custom among young Miao people) and “不落夫家” (a marriage custom in which the bride continues to live with her natal family) require deep explanation to prevent misinterpretation of local social ethics. In these instances, the translator must prioritize the communicative purpose over formal brevity. By reconstructing these terms into descriptive phrases, the translation transcends the linguistic barrier, allowing the target audience to appreciate the complex social fabric and alternative lifestyles of the Xiangxi people without the interference of cultural bias.

4. Translation Strategy Selection Mechanisms: An Integrated Explanatory Framework

The transition from a source-culture term to a target-language equivalent in the context of Xiangxi is not a matter of linguistic coincidence but a calibrated response to a multi-variable environment. This paper posits that the selection of a translation strategy is a teleological process, a goal-directed optimization problem where several key determinants interact to shape the final output. This mechanism can be conceptualized through the following four dimensions.

4.1. The Gradient of Culture-Loading Intensity (L)

At the foundation of any strategic choice is the inherent “opacity” or Culture-Loading Intensity of the term. Words that describe universal physical realities (such as “river” or “town”) possess low intensity and allow for transparent, direct translation. However, as the semantic load shifts

toward idiosyncratic ethnic experiences, such as the Tujia “哭嫁” or Miao “招魂”, the intensity increases. High-intensity terms are characterized by a lack of conceptual overlap in the target culture’s cognitive schema. Consequently, as the cultural load intensifies, the translator’s role evolves from a passive “decoder” to an active “cultural mediator”, necessitating a shift from formal correspondence to deep, interventionist explanation to prevent semiotic loss.

4.2. The Divergence of Cultural Type Domains (D)

The nature of the cultural domain serves as a structural constraint on the translation path. This study observes a clear dichotomy between Material Culture and Spiritual Culture. Terms belonging to the material domain, encompassing geographical landmarks, ethnic attire, and culinary techniques, possess a “referential tangibility”. These can often be effectively handled through transliteration or literal translation, as they allow the audience to attach a new label to a physical object. Conversely, spiritual culture, religious rites, social hierarchies, and ancestral mythologies, is abstract and “intangible”. Because these concepts exist only within the socio-semiotic framework of the Xiangxi minorities, they cannot be “mapped” onto Western concepts. Thus, the strategy must pivot toward functional rewriting and “cultural analogy” to make the invisible visible.

4.3. The Primacy of the Communicative Skopos (P)

In the specific genre of international publicity, the Communicative Purpose or Skopos serves as the ultimate arbiter of quality. Unlike literary translation, which may prioritize the preservation of the author’s idiosyncratic style, publicity translation aims for the “optimum communication effect”. The primary objective is to entice, inform, and resonate with a global audience. This pragmatic orientation justifies the sacrifice of “formal fidelity” in favor of “functional adequacy”. If a literal translation of a Miao custom confuses a potential tourist, it has failed its Skopos. Therefore, the translator is empowered to trim, expand, or reframe the source text to ensure it performs its intended function in the target cultural market.

4.4. The Boundary of Audience Receptivity (R)

Finally, the “realistic boundary” of any translation is defined by the Audience’s Cognitive Receptivity. A translation that is too “foreignized” may alienate the reader, while one that is too “domesticated” may erase the very cultural uniqueness that makes Xiangxi attractive. To navigate this tension, the “Literal Translation + Annotation” strategy emerges as a vital hybrid mechanism. This approach respects the reader’s intelligence by providing the authentic local term (preserving cultural “flavor”) while offering an explanatory safety net (ensuring comprehension). This balance ensures that the translation is neither an inaccessible enigma nor a homogenized imitation.

In summary, the selection mechanism can be articulated as a dynamic function: $Strategy = f(L, D, P, R)$ where the final translation path is the result of balancing the intensity of the load (L) and the nature of the domain (D) against the requirements of the purpose (P) and the limits of the audience (R).

5. Conclusion

This research has systematically explored the linguistic and cultural landscape of the Xiangxi region, providing a structured analysis of how ethnic minority culture-loaded words are, and should be, conveyed to a global audience. By categorizing these terms from the “material” to the “spiritual”, the study reveals a consistent strategic trajectory: as culture-loaded words move away from objective physical reference toward subjective psychological and social constructs, the translation strategy must transition from formal equivalence to meaning reconstruction. The findings underscore that the “one-size-fits-all” approach to translation is insufficient for

the nuanced requirements of ethnic minority cultures. Geographical toponyms may thrive under transliteration, ensuring navigability and “labeling” accuracy, but the profound complexities of Miao and Tujia ways of thinking demand a more hermeneutic, explanatory approach. The essence of successful international communication lies in “effect-orientation”. In this regard, the “Literal Translation + Annotation” model stands out as a sophisticated compromise, allowing for the preservation of Chinese ethnic identity while facilitating cross-cultural understanding.

Ultimately, the translation of Xiangxi’s cultural heritage is a vital component of China’s broader narrative strategy. While this paper provides a qualitative framework for strategy selection, it also opens the door for more empirical investigations. Future scholarly efforts should look toward corpus-driven methodologies and reception studies, utilizing eye-tracking data or sentiment analysis, to quantify how international audiences truly perceive these translated cultural markers. By refining these strategies, we can ensure that the unique cultural “voice” of Xiangxi is not merely translated, but effectively heard and appreciated across the global cultural horizon.

Acknowledgments

This work was financially supported by the fund of Excellent Youth Project of Scientific Research Program of Hunan Provincial Education Department, “Research on International Communication Translation of Xiangxi Ethnic Minority Culture from the Perspective of Skopos Theory” (Project No. 23B0671).

References

- [1] Liao, Q. *Explorations in Contemporary Western Translation Theory*[M]. Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2000.
- [2] Newmark, P. *A Textbook of Translation*[M]. London: Prentice Hall, 1988.
- [3] Ma, L. & Li, H. Research on the English Translation of Chinese Ethnic Minority Proper Nouns[J]. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (2023) No. 4: p. 151-157.
- [4] Reiß, K. & Vermeer, H. J. *Towards a General Theory of Translational Action: Skopos Theory Explained*[M]. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- [5] Nord, C. *Translation as a Purposeful Activity (2nd Edition): Functionalist Approaches Explained*[M]. New York: Routledge, 2018.