

# The Comparisons of Chinese and Western Cultures in Cross-Cultural Translation

Mengyao Wang

College of Foreign Languages, Capital Normal University, Beijing, China

\*Corresponding author: 1222062124@cnu.edu.com

## Abstract:

This paper uses the English translation of the well-known Chinese classic novel *Hong Lou Meng* as a case study to examine the difficulties and approaches associated with cross-cultural translation in literary works. The translation of festival names, the translation of idioms, and the translation regarding women make up the three sections of this work. Through a comparative investigation of the translation procedures of various versions, this research exposes the difficulties experienced in cross-cultural translation, including semantic change, cultural transmission, and feminist translation. It also suggests suitable translation techniques. It has been noted that translators must consider the cultural differences between the source and destination languages when translating between cultures. They are expected to utilize diverse translation techniques with flexibility to ensure the efficient conveyance of cultural information and optimize the literary value of the translated work.

**Keywords:** Cultural Translation; Translation Strategies; *Hong Lou Meng*; Festival; Idiom; Women Translation

## 1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, cross-cultural translation has become an important bridge for literary communication and cultural dissemination. As a treasure of Chinese classical literature, the English translation of *Hong Lou Meng* is of great significance for promoting Chinese culture to the world. However, there are numerous obstacles in translating *Hong Lou Meng* across cultural boundaries because Chinese and Western cultures diverge greatly. To provide helpful resources and inspiration for the English translation of *A Hong Lou Meng*, this talk will address the tactics and practices of cross-cultural translation in literary works from three perspectives: festival name translation, idiom translation, and feminist translation.

## 2. Translation of the Name of Festivals

China, a nation boasting a rich history spanning over 5,000 years, has a profound culture that is not only perpetuated through oral traditions but also documented in written forms. Among these, literary works are the most prominent vehicles for cultural transmission. Literary works incorporate traditional Chinese festivals, an essential aspect of Chinese culture. They are the whole embodiment of the rich history, culture, and spirit of the Chinese people. Different cultural origins have led to varying understandings

of key festival customs. Therefore, translating literary works is particularly important in correctly conveying traditional Chinese culture. *Hong Lou Meng* is a well-known Chinese classic that contains a rich festival culture. David Hawkes, a well-known Sinologist, deeply understands traditional Chinese culture, and his translation is one of the important translations of *Hong Lou Meng*. This part will start with the festival part of *Hong Lou Meng* to further explain cross-cultural translation.

The translation of the festival name is a particularly important part. In chapter 18, the emperor's concubine Jia Yuanchun makes a family visitation, which mentions the date as “正月十五上元之日.” The date is translated as “the fifteenth of the first month” [1]. In the traditional Chinese lunar calendar, there are three festivals to worship gods, namely “上元、中元、下元,” which fall on the first, seventh, and tenth months of the lunar calendar, respectively. “上元” is the day of the year's first full moon, so the translator translated it as “the fifteen of the first month,” which accurately clarified the date for readers unfamiliar with Chinese culture. Similarly, the festival appears in the later text, in chapter 53, in which the title mentions “除夕” and “元宵”; the translation of the two festivals are “New Year's Eve” and “Fifteenth Night” [2]. “Fifteen” here refers to “the fifteen of the first month”

mentioned above, the Lantern Festival. The translator simply translated “元宵” as the “fifteenth” in the title because the Lantern Festival is relatively unfamiliar to foreign readers and more difficult to explain. In the following article, a detailed explanation of the customs and circumstances of the Lantern Festival will help readers better understand this festival. He completely eschews the usual Chinese culture-laden vocabulary. He just conveys to the reader the idea of time, presumably intending to confuse Western readers who may not be aware of the event. One of the most significant traditional celebrations in China is the Lantern Festival. We must conclude that Hawkes uses “Fifteenth Night” to address this cultural meaning; hence, it is a form of regret [3]. It is worth mentioning that this title has another festival, New Year’s Eve. “除夕” is the last night of the old year and the night before the New Year. The second version, the night before the New Year, is adopted, corresponding to the word “eve,” which is also widely used in English. For example, in Western countries, there is Christmas Eve, which refers to December 24.

In chapter 27, it mentioned “芒种,” one of the 24 solar terms, translated as “the festival of Grain in Ear” [1]. The translator takes the free translation and translates according to the characteristics of the festival. This solar term symbolizes the maturity of plants when wheat is ripe for harvest. Ear is a verb in English slang that means a plant heading.

Besides, “清明节” is mentioned in the work, in Chapter 58, “这日乃是清明之日”. The customs of the festival are also mentioned, “祭祀” and “祭枢烧纸.” “清明节” is the grandest festival of ancestor worship in the Chinese nation. It has both natural and cultural connotations, and sacrifice is also the largest and most important tradition of the Qingming Festival. This event is immensely significant for the Chinese people, who value their ancestors and filial piety. There might be some confusion because the translator mistranslated “清明节” as “spring cleaning day” and neglected to emphasize the ancestor worship custom. Festival practices are mentioned in the following section despite the translation’s lack of comprehensiveness. Examples of these rituals are “having prepared the usual offerings” and “cleaning the family graves” [1]. Improving the festival tradition’s communication also addresses the preceding piece’s faults. Therefore, in translations involving traditional festivals, finding the common points of both cultures is an essential element of effective translation.

### 3. Translation of Idioms

Idioms are the most able to show the charm and culture of

the Chinese language. The following part will be carried out by analyzing the translation of idioms in a *Hong Lou Meng*. The protagonist of *Hong Lou Meng*, Jia Baoyu, calls himself “怡红公子” in the poetry club, and his residence is “怡红院.” In Chinese culture, red is the color of the sun, representing warmth and enthusiasm. It is often associated with power, nobility, and royalty, so the Chinese people have loved and respected it for thousands of years. In Western society, red is generally associated with fear, anxiety, anger, and other negative emotions. However, other people hold the belief that red is the color of blood, signifying violence and bloodshed. Since green in Western culture stands for justice, loyalty, and happiness, Hawkes turned these into “Green Boy” and “the Court of Green” in the translation. It is worth mentioning that green has a bad connotation in China; people always gossip that a woman or a man wears a green hat if she or he is convicted of adultery [3].

There are also many four-character idioms mentioned in *Hong Lou Meng*. “他两家也就算门当户对了,” “门当户对” in this sentence was translated into “the two families were so obviously suited.” This word is employed in the choice of marriages, referring to the social, political, and economic position of both men and women, suitable for intermarriage. In literal Chinese, it alludes to the rigid hierarchical system of ancient times, through which one can know a family’s social status. As a result, the translator follows the free translation approach while preserving the original cultural practices [4]. There is also a four-character phrase concerning mood that is worth mentioning. In Chapter 5, this part describes that Xue Baochai is more popular than Lin Daiyu and then mentions Daiyu’s opinion on the matter “黛玉心中便有些悒郁不忿.” The idiom “悒郁不忿” can be divided into two parts. “悒郁” means a kind of sadness and worry, and “不忿” represents a kind of dissatisfaction, unconvinced psychological feeling. The translation version is “put out,” meaning it feels upset and annoyed, but there is no sense of dissatisfaction, so the translation is incomplete in this context [5].

The translation of the proverb is worth discussing. When Daiyu felt sad that Baoyu had neglected her because of Baochai, Baoyu used “亲不间疏，先不僭后” to comfort Daiyu, which proves their closeness of friendship. This proverb originally meant that people close together would not be divided by people far apart. People who arrive first will not be overtaken by others who arrive later. It is true that “close relatives are the kindest people and old friends are the best friends,” and their relationship will never be surpassed in a good way. In the process of Baoyu comforting Daiyu, the repeated use of “can” and “could” in the translation also indicates their close friendship [6].

In the chapter 81, Baoyu is fishing with her sisters and mentions an allegorical saying; he says, “我是要做姜太公的,” the allegorical saying is “姜太公钓鱼——愿者上钩.” This tells the story of Jiang Taigong. He often fishes by the Wei River. His fishing method is very special. The rod is short, the line is only three feet long, the hook is straight, and he does not put bait. He was made fun of by others. “The willing will take the bait,” he declared. Consequently, the translator began by transliterating Baoyu’s comments before quickly introducing the allegorical saying in a few sentences. This illustrates how overconfident Baoyu is and how only in this way can one have fun [7]. From this point of view, when translating an idiom, it is necessary to translate its own meaning and its extended meaning. This can convey the author’s meaning, but also spread the Chinese idiom culture.

#### 4. Translation Above Women

Hong Lou Meng is a love tragedy novel with many female characters set in a feudal culture. The female characters in the works of author Cao Xueqin are given a lot of room, so translating these characters is an important part of translating Hong Lou Meng. Several earlier research studies have shown that the main focus of feminist translation theory is on examining how the translator’s ideological position and gender awareness influence the translation process. It has also examined the spread of gender-specific vocabulary in the translated text and delves into exploring feminist translation methodologies. These revelations have offered feminist scholars and translation researchers an all-encompassing perception of the present status of applying feminist translation theory in analyzing translated novels [7]. There are two points worth paying attention to in this part: the translation of female names and the translation of women’s inner feelings and emotions.

In ancient China, where monogamy and multiple concubines were practiced, women followed a strict hierarchical order and had different names for women in different positions. In the book, there are mainly the following titles: “贾母” is the title for the highest status women in the family, “夫人” is the title for married women in the next generation, such as “王夫人,” and “姨妈” is the title, which generally refers to the sister of “夫人,” and in both generations, the surname is the surname of their husband. The next generation of women are often called “氏,” such as “尤氏,” where the surname differs from the previous generation; here is their surname. In the next generation, women are called “姐” such as “巧姐,” which is usually called unmarried young women [8]. In chapter 55, Tanchun said: “太太不在家, 姨娘安静些养神罢了。” There are two female titles involved in this sentence: 太太

and 姨娘. In Chinese, “太太” and “姨娘” both refer to married women, but “太太” generally refers to the wife, and “姨娘” refers to the concubine. In the context of this sentence, Tanchun is the biological daughter of Concubine Zhao, but because of the feudal ethics at that time, she can only call Lady Wang her mother. In the translation version, the translator translated “姨娘” into “you”; such a translation makes the relationship between the two speakers very clear but does not translate the culture behind it. Although Tanchun can not call Concubine Zhao’s mother, she can not just call her “you” because this is not in line with the generational relationship. And “太太” here is translated as “Lady Wang.” Lady Wang’s translation interprets the identity of the character from the perspective of the reader, rather than adopting the viewpoint of the original language speaker, Tanchun; she calls Lady Wang “太太,” which is a salutation [9].

In chapter 25, “你心里自然有我,……你又怕我多心, 故意着急, 安心哄我。” Hawkes translated it as, “I know you must care for me a little bit... You pretend to be upset to allay my suspicions [10].” Here, the translator clearly translates Daiyu’s inner feelings, but the last sentence, “看来两个人原本是一个心……”, has not been translated and is therefore not particularly faithful to the original book [11]. Here, the translator leaves out some of Daiyu’s internal activities to translate appear more concise and clear. However, this ignores Daiyu’s feelings as the heroine, which impacts how foreign readers interpret and comprehend the text to some extent [12]. From this point of view, the meaning should be correctly conveyed in combination with the context for complicated titles. Women’s inner feelings should also be retained to enrich the character image.

#### 5. Conclusion

Through the study of festival names, idioms, and feminist translations in Hong Lou Meng, this paper draws the following conclusions. Firstly, to ensure proper transmission of cultural information when translating festival names, translators must completely comprehend the festival background and connotations of the source language and culture. They can then use literal translation, free translation, or annotation techniques. Secondly, in translating idioms, translators need to pay attention to the semantic transformation and cultural connotation of idioms to avoid cultural misunderstanding or loss caused by simple literal translation. From a feminist translation viewpoint, it is imperative for translators to carefully consider the portrayal of female characters and their gender expressions in Hong Lou Meng. By adapting their translation techniques, they can bring the feminist concepts woven throughout the

source material to light. In summary, cross-cultural translation in literary works necessitates translators possess a high level of language proficiency and cultural literacy. They also need to be able to apply a variety of translation techniques flexibly to effectively convey cultural information and optimize literary value.

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