
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Re-evaluating Overseas Readers' Acceptability from a Postcolonial Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Grounded in postcolonial theory, this study examines the annotations in *Diary of a Madman* and *Other Stories* translated by William A. Lyell, in conjunction with reader reviews of the translation on Goodreads, to investigate the overseas reception of a translated text that preserves cultural heterogeneity. By analyzing how foreign readers respond to culture-specific elements retained through annotation, the paper reflects on the prevailing tendency in the outward translation of Chinese literature to overemphasize fluency and naturalness as a result of underestimating target readers' acceptability. The study aims to offer insights for the practice of translating Chinese literature for overseas readerships, re-evaluate their capacity for engaging with cultural difference, and thereby contribute to more effective global dissemination of Chinese literature.

KEYWORDS

postcolonial theory, *Diary of a Madman* and *Other Stories*, William A. Lyell; reader reception; outward translation of Chinese literature

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1. Introduction

In an era of globalization marked by increasingly frequent cross-cultural exchanges, the translation and circulation of literary works is not merely an act of linguistic transfer, but a complex process of intercultural dialogue and negotiation of power relations. As an important vehicle through which "Chinese stories" are introduced to the world, the overseas dissemination of Chinese literature is closely tied to the choice and implementation of translation strategies, which in turn shape the image and influence of Chinese culture in the international arena. For decades, debates over the core concepts of "domestication" and "foreignization" have remained central within translation studies. As Wang Dongfeng (2002) observed, this debate has evolved from a primarily linguistic concern to one encompassing poetics, culture, and even politics, with its central issue revolving around how cultural heterogeneity of the source text should be handled in translation. Within a postcolonial context in particular, the question of whether heterogeneity should be preserved is imbued with deeper cultural and political significance.

The emergence of postcolonial translation theory has provided a new perspective for examining translation practices. Fei Xiaoping (2003) pointed out that postcolonial translation studies focused on the power mechanisms disseminated through translation in the process of colonization, as well as the historical trajectories of resistance and appropriation that accompany them. This theoretical approach emphasizes the use of foreignizing strategies to resist the hegemony of dominant cultures and to safeguard the independence and subjectivity of marginalized cultures. Similarly, Ge Xiaoqin (2002) argued that Western discussions of domestication and foreignization were largely situated within a postcolonial framework, exposing the cultural colonialism embedded in domestication strategies adopted by dominant cultures and advocating foreignization as a form of resistance.

However, in the practice of translating Chinese literature for international audiences—especially against the broader backdrop of the “going global” initiative—translators and publishers have often shown a marked preference for domestication. Fluency and naturalness in the target language are frequently prioritized, sometimes at the expense of culturally specific elements, in order to align with target readers’ reading habits and cultural expectations and thereby enhance acceptability. While this reader-oriented strategy may increase accessibility to some extent, it also tends to obscure the value of heterogeneity emphasized by postcolonial translation theory.

As the founding figure of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun occupies a central position in both Chinese literary history and world literature. His short story collections *Call to Arms (Nahan)* and *Wanderings (Panghuang)* not only signify the maturation of modern vernacular fiction in China but are also deeply rooted in the historical context of a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. Focusing on the existential predicaments of peasants and intellectuals, Lu Xun’s fiction ushered in “a new era of modern Chinese literature” through its incisive critique and distinctive style. His works have been included in influential anthologies such as the Longman Anthology of World Literature, attaining canonical status and sustained scholarly attention in international academia.

Among the various English translations of Lu Xun’s fiction, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories* (1990), translated by the American sinologist William A. Lyell, occupies a distinctive and important position. Widely regarded as “one of the most renowned Lu Xun scholars in the United States,” Lyell is associated with one of the three most influential English translations of Lu Xun’s fiction. His version is particularly noted for its careful handling of cultural heterogeneity and its extensive use of annotations. From a postcolonial perspective, examining how Lyell explicates culturally specific Chinese elements through annotation and how such strategies are positively received by foreign readers offers a reasonable basis for questioning the assumption, prevalent in literary translation practice, that reducing heterogeneity is necessary for overseas acceptance. This assumption may in fact reflect an underestimation of foreign readers’ acceptability.

Adopting a postcolonial perspective, this paper first analyzes how Lyell preserves and explicates Chinese cultural elements through annotations in his English translation of *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, demonstrating how such practices align with the postcolonial emphasis on using heterogeneity as a means of resisting cultural hegemony. It then draws on reader reviews of the translation on Goodreads to illustrate its favorable reception among overseas readers, thereby indicating that foreign readers’ intercultural competence and their interest in Chinese literature have been steadily increasing. Translations that retain cultural heterogeneity can therefore be accepted and even appreciated by international audiences. On this basis, the paper argues that translators should avoid underestimating foreign readers’ acceptability or assuming a priori that fluency-oriented translations are necessarily preferred. Instead, future practices of literary translation should be informed by empirical observation and supported by effective auxiliary strategies, allowing for the reasonable retention of Chinese cultural elements so that translations can achieve reader acceptance while simultaneously facilitating the meaningful global dissemination of Chinese literature.

2. Heterogeneity-Oriented Postcolonial Theory

As a prominent area in international translation studies, postcolonial translation research centers on examining the power mechanisms disseminated through translation in the process of colonization, as well as the various forms of resistance that emerge in response. The intellectual genealogy of this approach can be traced back to early postcolonial critics such as Edward Said, and was further developed and systematized by scholars including Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eventually becoming an indispensable discourse in cultural criticism. Pan Wenguo (2002) noted that since the late 1980s, translation studies have increasingly undergone a “cultural turn,” within which postcolonialism exhibits a particularly strong political orientation. By situating translation within broader social, political, economic, cultural, and ideological contexts, postcolonial theory offers a profound and socially meaningful understanding of translation activity.

Postcolonial translation theory foregrounds the unequal power relations between different nations, languages, and cultures, arguing that translation—depending on its purposes, strategies, and methods—can function either as an accomplice to colonial hegemony or as a force capable of dismantling cultural dominance and ethnocentrism. Within this framework, foreignization is regarded as a crucial strategy of resistance. Luo Xuanmin (2004) pointed out that many discussions of domestication and foreignization remain confined to the linguistic level, thereby misrepresenting the foreignization/domestication issue as conceptualized within postcolonial theory. He argued examining foreignization in literary translation from both cultural and linguistic perspectives to uncover its deeper cultural and political implications. At its core, foreignization seeks to preserve the heterogeneity of the source culture—that is, those cultural features, linguistic styles, and modes of thought that diverge from the target culture and may even pose challenges to comprehension. Such preservation is understood as a form of respect for the subjectivity of the source culture, a defense of cultural diversity, and a challenge to Western-centric cultural hegemony.

3. Reader-Oriented Outward Translation of Chinese Literature

In contrast to the postcolonial emphasis on preserving heterogeneity, the outward translation of Chinese literature has long been dominated by a reader-oriented paradigm that prioritizes fluency and acceptability. This approach places the target reader's reading experience and degree of acceptance at the center of evaluation, holding that the success of a translation largely depends on whether it can be understood, appreciated, and accepted by its intended readership. It is commonly assumed that readers are more likely to favor translations that are fluent, natural, and "read as if they were not translations," and such criteria have long served as key benchmarks for assessing translation quality.

In practice, a reader-oriented approach typically requires translators to consider target readers' linguistic habits, cultural backgrounds, aesthetic expectations, and knowledge structure to adapt the translation accordingly. This adaptation often manifests in the use of domestication strategies, whereby source-culture elements are "localized" to align with the cognitive frameworks of target readers, thus reducing potential barriers to comprehension and enhancing acceptability. In his discussion of reception aesthetics and reader orientation in the translation of tourism publicity materials, Hong Ming (2006) similarly emphasized the need for translators to consider differences in language, culture, and aesthetic conventions between China and the West, as well as the readers' horizon of expectations. At the same time, he argued that translators should not passively cater to readers, but should instead aspire to "go beyond" and even "create" readers by expanding their horizon of expectations. Through translation, Chinese linguistic characteristics and rich historical culture could be introduced to foreign audiences, thereby enhancing readers' linguistic and cultural competence. Although Hong Ming acknowledged the more ambitious goal of "creating readers," his argument remained grounded in the premise that a translation must first and foremost be accepted.

The broader context of the "going global" initiative has further reinforced this reader-oriented tendency in the outward translation of Chinese literature. Xie Tianzhen (2014) offered a critical analysis of the challenges underlying the international dissemination of Chinese literature, pointing out a persistent misconception among policymakers, scholars, and practitioners alike: namely, the assumption that "going global" was merely a matter of translation, and that once Chinese literary works were rendered into foreign languages, they would naturally circulate abroad. He argued that this process actually involved the translation of a relatively weak culture into a dominant one, and was complicated by issues such as temporal and linguistic asymmetries. Within this asymmetrical context, domestication was often regarded as the "safest" and most "effective" strategy for ensuring acceptance by readers in dominant cultures, as it minimizes the risk of alienation or misunderstanding caused by excessive cultural heterogeneity.

In sum, reader-oriented approaches in the outward translation of Chinese literature tend to emphasize readability and the target reader's reading experience, pursuing fluent and smooth translations as a primary objective. In practice, this orientation favors domestication strategies that reduce culturally heterogeneous elements likely to impede comprehension. While such an approach has, to some extent, facilitated the overseas circulation of Chinese literature, its excessive emphasis on acceptability may result in an over-attenuation of source-culture heterogeneity, thereby obscuring the postcolonial values of cultural resistance and the preservation of cultural subjectivity.

4. The Superficial Incompatibility between Postcolonialism and the Outward Translation of Chinese Literature

A closer examination of postcolonial translation theory and reader-oriented practices in the outward translation of Chinese literature reveals a superficial incompatibility between the two. This incompatibility, however, does not stem from an inherent theoretical opposition. Rather, it arises from differences in strategic choices and reader assumptions shaped by specific historical contexts and cultural power relations.

On the one hand, postcolonial translation theory is oriented toward heterogeneity and emphasizes foreignization as a means of resisting cultural hegemony and safeguarding the autonomy and discursive authority of the source culture. By foregrounding power relations in translation, it cautions against domestication as a potential vehicle for cultural colonialism, and instead advocates preserving the strangeness and distinctiveness of the source culture to challenge Western-centric frameworks. On the other hand, the dominant paradigm in the outward translation of Chinese literature prioritizes reader acceptability and tends to adopt domestication strategies to reduce barriers for target readers and expand international influence. This approach is motivated by the recognition that translating Chinese literature involves mediating a relatively weak culture for readers in dominant cultures, a process marked by challenges such as temporal and linguistic gaps. To ensure wide readership and acceptance, translators often choose to sacrifice certain aspects of source-culture heterogeneity to align with target readers' horizons of expectation and aesthetic preferences.

Moreover, the two paradigms differ significantly in their assumptions about target readers. Within postcolonial translation theory, readers are, to some extent, positioned as subjects to be "challenged." Through foreignization, translators seek to disrupt readers' horizons of expectation and prompt reflection on their own cultural centrism, while presupposing that target readers are capable of accepting, or even appreciating heterogeneous elements as a means of engaging with marginalized cultures. In

contrast, reader-oriented approaches to the translation of foreign literature tend to view readers as subjects to be “accommodated.” Translators strive to satisfy established reading habits and cultural expectations in order to ensure smooth circulation, often presuming that target readers possess limited knowledge of foreign cultures and prefer translations that bear minimal traces of translation. Consequently, domestication is frequently employed to reduce heterogeneity and maximize acceptance.

In light of the above, the seemingly incompatible relationship between postcolonialism and the outward translation of Chinese literature is not the result of irreconcilable theoretical differences, but rather of divergent communicative goals, strategic choices, and an underestimation of target readers’ acceptability within reader-oriented paradigms. This superficial incompatibility conceals the possibility of balance and integration between the two. This study seeks to move beyond this surface-level opposition through a case analysis of the annotations in William Lyell’s English translation of *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, aiming to demonstrate that, when supported by appropriate translation strategies and auxiliary devices, the preservation of heterogeneity does not hinder reader acceptance. On the contrary, it may foster deeper engagement with and reflection on Chinese culture, thereby offering a new perspective and practical pathway for future literary translation and contributing more effectively to the global dissemination of Chinese literature and culture.

5. Heterogeneity in the Annotations of Lyell’s Translation of *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*

From the perspective of postcolonial translation theory, Lyell constructs a systematic paratextual framework of interpretation in his translation *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories* through a total of 403 annotations. These notes encompass biographical information on historical figures such as Cai Yuanpei, contextual explanations of pivotal events including the Revolution of 1911, and outlines of key moments in Lu Xun’s life. More broadly, they offer in-depth explications of traditional Chinese thoughts, institutional structures, and social and cultural practices. Through this comprehensive annotation strategy, a wide range of Chinese elements embedded in the source text—from historical context to cultural texture—are transformed into intelligible units of knowledge for English-language readers, thereby creating an auxiliary cultural interpretive space surrounding the translated text.

What merits particular attention is that Lyell, as a translator operating within the “dominant culture” of the English-speaking world, does not follow the conventional domestication-oriented path of minimizing or simplifying source-text heterogeneity in order to conform to target readers’ presumed expectations. Instead, he adopts an approach centered on cultural presentation and knowledge transmission, deliberately offering English-language readers a richly articulated vision of Chinese history and culture as he understands it. As Lyell (1990) states in the introduction to his translation, “a translator should provide enough documentation to ensure that the reader can achieve roughly the same understanding—or misunderstanding—of the text that he has himself”. Through the supplementary background information provided in his annotations, Lyell seeks to enable English readers to arrive at an understanding comparable to his own. Consequently, his notes go beyond brief or superficial glosses; they frequently incorporate historical depth and social analysis, aiming to reconstruct the complex meanings that particular concepts or phenomena acquire within the Chinese context.

The interpretive strategy adopted by Lyell reflects a strong sense of dual identity as both a sinologist and a literary translator. This dual positioning leads him to assume responsibilities extending beyond linguistic transfer, positioning him as a cultural mediator and scholarly guide for the target readership. The extensive annotations are intended to address potential gaps in target readers’ historical and cultural knowledge, thereby reducing cultural distance in the reading process. In terms of reception effects, the dense annotations not only facilitate overseas readers’ understanding of the socio-cultural background of Lu Xun’s works and enhances interpretive depth, but also effectively transform the translation into a distinctive channel for systematically introducing Lu Xun and the Chinese cultural traditions underpinning his fiction to the English-speaking world. In this sense, Lyell’s annotated translation participates, to some extent, in the broader process of cross-cultural knowledge dissemination associated with the global circulation of Chinese culture.

5.1 State Institutions

In Lu Xun’s literary world, narrative settings are often located in the suspended and turbulent transitional period following the collapse of the feudal dynasty, when old and new orders coexist uneasily. Critiques of entrenched institutions such as the bureaucratic system and the imperial examination system constitute a central thread in his fiction. For Chinese readers familiar with this historical context, the figure of Kong Yiji alone is sufficient to evoke a holistic understanding of and deep reflection on the fate of intellectuals under the examination system. For overseas readers, however, rendering “Keju” simply as the “Imperial Examination System” risks reducing it to a neutral historical term, or even prompting it to be understood as a conventional merit-based selection mechanism. As a result, the cultural critique and historical irony embedded in the original may be significantly attenuated in translation, creating obstacles for target readers’ access to the text’s deeper social implications.

From the perspective of intercultural transmission, this dilemma highlights a recurrent problem in translation: when cultural signifiers that are highly contextualized and saturated with specific historical memory and collective affect enter a target-language system lacking corresponding background knowledge, their rich meanings are prone to being flattened into abstract conceptual labels. In Lu Xun's fiction, "Keju" refers not merely to a mechanism of talent selection, but also functions as a metonym for an entire cultural power structure intertwined with social hierarchy, value systems, and individual destinies. Without the reconstruction of its historical depth and social embeddedness through effective paratextual means, the sharp critical edge of the original is inevitably blunted.

The translator's challenge, therefore, lies not only in lexical transfer, but in reconstructing within the target context the historical semantic field attached to the institution, enabling readers to traverse cultural distance and perceive the systemic oppression and human tragedy underlying it. This is precisely where the value of Lyell's extensive annotations becomes evident. By operating beyond mere lexical glossing, they seek to restore the historical weight and critical orientation that are liable to be lost in direct translation.

Example 1

ST:难道真如市上所说, 皇帝已经停了考, 不要秀才和举人了, 因此赵家减了威风, 因此他们也便小觑了他么? (Lu Xun, 2000)

TT: Could it possibly be true, as people were saying in town, that the emperor had put an end to the civil service examinations and did not need Budding Talents anymore? Could it be that the Zhao family's prestige had consequently declined and that people now felt free to look down on Ah Q as a result?

Annotation: In one of the most drastic moves of modern Chinese history, the Manchu government announced the abolition of the civil service examinations in 1905. The examination system had existed in some form ever since 136 B.C. All through that long period, knowledge of the classics had provided virtually the only access to the Confucian ladder of success. Now that ladder was gone. (Lyell, 1990)

Lyell's annotation on the imperial examination system effectively addresses a historical and cultural concept of pronounced heterogeneity in the source text. Without detailed contextual explanation, English-language readers would find it difficult to grasp the central role of the examination system in traditional Chinese society, and would therefore be unable to perceive the broader connection between its abolition and the decline of the Zhao family's social prestige in *The True Story of Ah Q*. By characterizing the abolition of the examination system in 1905 as "one of the most drastic moves of modern Chinese history" and tracing its origins back to 136 B.C., Lyell foregrounds both the system's function as an instrument of ideological inculcation over more than two millennia and its near-monopolistic position in the selection of state elites.

Furthermore, Lyell clarifies that "knowledge of the classics had provided virtually the only access to the Confucian ladder of success," and that "that ladder was gone," thereby underscoring the fundamental significance of the examination system for the entry of the scholar-gentry into officialdom and for upward social mobility. This explication not only deepens the interpretive richness of the translation, but also makes explicit why the abolition of the examination system directly destabilizes the Zhao family's social standing and precipitates subtle shifts in surrounding characters' attitudes toward Ah Q. The annotation thus reveals how the educational system was deeply intertwined with social mobility and class identity, forming a stable mechanism of social reproduction.

Crucially, Lyell does not simply equate the imperial examination system with any Western examination model. Instead, he reconstructs its distinctive ideological foundations in Confucian classics, its political function in state governance, and the far-reaching cultural influence of its collapse. This approach avoids reducing China's long educational tradition to a familiar Western analogue. Through scholarly annotation, Lyell preserves the institutional heterogeneity of the source text while supplying target readers with the necessary historical and cultural framework, thereby enabling a more informed and nuanced understanding. Such a strategy exemplifies the postcolonial translation principle of resisting cultural assimilation through the deliberate foregrounding of heterogeneity.

Example 2

ST: "阿呀呀, 你放了道台了....."。

TT: I know you're a big official—a Daotai, they say.

Annotation: Although the republic had been established a half dozen years or so earlier, Second Sister Yang still refers to him with an official title that was employed during the late Manchu dynasty.

The term “*Daotai*” designates a senior official within the local administrative hierarchy of the Qing dynasty. Subordinate to the governor-general, the office occupied an intermediate position between the provincial and prefectural levels, exercising authority over several prefectures and counties while bearing significant fiscal and administrative responsibilities. In the late Qing bureaucratic system, *Daotai* thus functioned as a marker of specific political status and prestige. Although the historical moment depicted in Lu Xun’s narratives belongs to the early Republican period—following the collapse of the imperial system and the establishment of a new political order—the continued use of the title *Daotai* by characters in the text is more than a residual reference to an obsolete office. Rather, it reflects the persistence of pre-Republican political imaginaries and identity formations within social consciousness, despite the ostensible transformation of political institutions. This produces a form of “symbolic temporal lag” between institutional nomenclature and contemporary historical reality.

Confronted with a designation saturated with historical specificity and cultural-political implications, Lyell refrains from translating *Daotai* into an approximate English bureaucratic term (such as circuit intendant). Instead, he retains the transliterated form of *Daotai* and supplements it with an explanatory note. This choice constitutes a deliberate foreignizing strategy. Rather than encouraging target readers to rely on familiar Western administrative categories for immediate analogy, Lyell preserves the term’s strangeness and cultural texture, thereby avoiding its reduction to a transparent and seemingly equivalent Western bureaucratic label. In doing so, he prevents the erasure of the particular Qing administrative framework and the ideological structures encoded in the term.

By retaining the source-language term, Lyell situates English-language readers within an interpretive space that requires active engagement with an “other” political system and its cultural classifications, instead of offering an easily consumable cultural substitute. At the practical level, this approach resonates with one of the central concerns of postcolonial translation theory: resisting the tendencies toward cultural assimilation and simplification that often accompany translation. Through the deliberate foregrounding of linguistic and cultural heterogeneity, the translation prompts readers to recognize the internal specificity of Chinese administrative traditions and historical experience, thereby maintaining respect for difference and preserving historical depth in cross-linguistic practice.

5.2 Social Culture

Lu Xun’s works are deeply rooted in the social and cultural soil of China, with their narrative spaces often constructed around small towns modeled on Shaoxing. The local customs, festive rituals, and scenes of everyday life that permeate these texts are not merely decorative markers of regional color, but integral components of Lu Xun’s critical vision and aesthetic significance. They represent a vital and dynamic vernacular dimension of traditional Chinese culture. At the same time, it is precisely these highly contextualized cultural elements, embedded in specific regional histories and collective memories, that pose substantial challenges for cross-cultural translation and reception.

For translators, the handling of such culture-specific items entails a dual pressure. On the one hand, rigid literalism or the unmediated retention of unfamiliar forms may preserve source-text heterogeneity, but risk erecting insurmountable barriers to comprehension for target readers. On the other hand, a fully domesticated strategy that substitutes seemingly equivalent customs or images from the target culture may ensure narrative fluency, but inevitably erodes or even effaces the cultural texture and historical density upon which the text depends. In such cases, the concrete and critically charged “world of Luzhen” constructed by Lu Xun risks losing its authenticity.

The translator must therefore assume a dual role as cultural interpreter and re-creator: avoiding the forcible assimilation of the source culture into the target culture’s cognitive framework—which may amount to a form of “cultural colonization”—while simultaneously reconstructing the context and meaning of source-culture elements through effective translational mediation. It is precisely through annotation that Lyell provides English-language readers with such a channel, preserving heterogeneity while facilitating the reconstruction of cultural understanding.

Example 3

ST: 我们日里到海边捡贝壳去，红的绿的都有，鬼见怕也有，观音手也有。

TT: Days, we could go out to the beach and collect shells—reds, blues, ghost-scarers, Guanyin hands.

Annotation: “Ghost-scarers” were shells that the local children sometimes wore on bracelets to ward off evil spirits. “Guanyin hands” were starfish, so named because their many arms called to mind the arms of the Thousand-handed Guanyin (Goddess of Mercy).

“Ghost-scarers” (*guijianpa*) refers to shell ornaments worn on the wrists or ankles of children in the Shaoxing region, which folk belief endowed with the power to ward off evil spirits. Guanyin, by contrast, denotes a bodhisattva widely venerated in Chinese Buddhism, whose imagery and significance are deeply embedded in local religious contexts. If these terms were

rendered simply as “ghost-scarers” and “Guanyin” without any cultural annotation, target readers would likely struggle to establish the conceptual link between shells and apotropaic belief, or to perceive Guanyin’s culturally specific position within Chinese Buddhism as distinct from more generalized Buddhist designations such as Avalokitesvara.

Lyell therefore adopts a strategy of foreignization supplemented by annotation. He resists replacing Guanyin with a more familiar Sanskrit-based term in the English-speaking world, insisting instead on the pinyin form to preserve its cultural specificity. Similarly, he refrains from substituting *guijianpa* with a Western equivalent of a protective talisman. More importantly, his annotations systematically explicate the folk beliefs, religious imagery, and social practices underlying these terms, thereby retaining cultural heterogeneity at the lexical level while providing readers with a necessary interpretive framework through paratext.

This translational approach maintains the authenticity and local color of the folkloric imagery in Lu Xun’s text, while bridging the potential interpretive void caused by cultural absence. By resisting cultural homogenization and fostering understanding through annotation, Lyell avoids dissolving Chinese folk beliefs and Buddhist practices into familiar Western religious or anthropological categories. Instead, by presenting their origins, functions, and social embeddedness, he invites readers to recognize and reflect upon difference, constructing within the target-language system a semantic space in which these elements can be understood and critically engaged. In doing so, the translation encourages readers to move beyond their own cultural frameworks and to confront the autonomy and integrity of another cultural logic.

Example 4

ST: “阿阿，阿发，这边是你家的，这边是老六一家的，我们偷那一边的呢？”

TT: “Hey Ah-fa, this side belongs to your family and that side belongs to Old Six-one. Which side should we steal from?”

Annotation: According to customs governing naming practices in and around Shaoxing, it is probable that when Six-one was born, his grandfather was sixty-one. Six-one would then have acquired this name in honor of his grandfather.

The personal name “Liu Yi” (Six-one) vividly reflects a naming logic rooted in concrete family chronology and traditional notions of filial piety in rural Chinese society, rather than in abstract symbolism or religious systems. As Lyell explains in his annotation, in Shaoxing and surrounding areas it was customary to name a newborn after the age of the grandfather at the time of birth. Thus, if the grandfather was sixty-one years old, the child might be named “Six-one.”

Confronted with this culturally specific naming practice, Lyell adopts a cautious foreignizing strategy in the translation. Rather than domesticating “Liu Yi” into a conventional Western personal name, he retains its literal rendering as “Old Six-one.” This choice preserves the strangeness of the naming practice and compels English-language readers to confront a naming logic fundamentally different from their own. At the same time, Lyell is aware that literal translation alone risks reducing the name to an opaque or even bizarre signifier in the target context. His detailed annotation therefore performs a crucial mediating function. By explaining the custom and re-embedding the name within the regional cultural context of Shaoxing, the annotation transforms what might appear as an arbitrary or absurd combination of syllables into a culturally meaningful expression imbued with ethical sentiment and social significance.

5.3 Traditional Philosophy

Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism constitute three indispensable intellectual traditions within Chinese culture and are central to foreign readers’ understanding of Chinese philosophical worldviews. Confucianism and Daoism are indigenous to China, and even Buddhism—though introduced from India—developed core concepts and modes of reasoning that differ structurally from Western philosophical traditions grounded in ancient Greek rationalism and Hebraic religious thought. In the absence of explanatory annotations, literal translations of key philosophical terms and allusions are highly susceptible to simplification, misinterpretation, or absorption into pre-existing Western cognitive frameworks, resulting in a serious loss of their indigenous semantic depth and cultural spirit.

Lyell’s annotations on philosophical elements in his translation actively intervene at this critical juncture. Through scholarly explanation, they safeguard the heterogeneity and discursive autonomy of Chinese thought, while guiding readers to recognize that the predicaments, choices, and destinies of Lu Xun’s characters are often rooted in value systems and meaning structures fundamentally different from those of the West. In doing so, the translation enables English-language readers not only to comprehend the narrative more fully but also to gain insight into Chinese philosophical traditions as operative cultural logics rather than abstract doctrines.

Example 5

ST: 直起身又看一看豆，自己摇头说，“不多不多！多哉乎？不多也。”

TT: Then he'd straighten up, wag his head from side to side as though intoning the classics and say: "Few be my beans. Hath the gentleman many? Nay, he hath hardly any."

Annotation: This passage is from *Analects* 9.6.3. Hearing that he has been criticized for having practical skills (unlike the ideal gentleman who disdains practical things), Confucius explains that when he was young he lived in humble circumstances and thus had to acquire many practical abilities. He then asks rhetorically whether a gentleman has such abilities and answers that he does not. Kong's use of the quotation is bizarre but appropriate, because both he and the sage share the surname "Kong".

In literary translation, rendering classical quotations is particularly complex, as it involves not only linguistic transfer but also cultural interpretation. In *Kong Yiji*, Lu Xun stages a scene in which the protagonist cites *the Analects* to justify possessing only a handful of beans, thereby creating a dense nexus of layered meanings. If the translator were to paraphrase the quotation into fluent modern English, the deliberate archaism of the original—along with its function in characterizing Kong Yiji's pedantry and anachronism—would be erased. Conversely, mechanically preserving a classical linguistic form without mediation could render the passage opaque to target readers, reducing the quotation to an empty stylistic gesture.

Lyell's strategy here demonstrates a high degree of theoretical awareness and methodological balance. In the main text, he resists simplification and instead deliberately adopts a pseudo-archaic English register, formally approximating the classical tone and estranging quality of the original. This stylistic choice signals the quotation's temporal and discursive distance, alerting readers to its non-contemporary and canonical status. Crucially, Lyell then restores semantic clarity and narrative irony through a detailed annotation. Rather than labeling the line vaguely as a "Confucian saying," the note precisely identifies its source in *the Analects* and reconstructs its original context—Confucius's defense of his own practical abilities. This explanation exposes the irony produced by Lu Xun's recontextualization: words originally used by Confucius to affirm his versatility are distorted by Kong Yiji into a feeble self-justification for poverty. The annotation further highlights the shared surname "Kong," drawing attention to the absurd yet poignant mimetic relationship between the petty scholar and the sage—a connection immediately apparent to Chinese readers but entirely inaccessible to English readers without paratextual guidance.

Example 6

ST: “——那只有去诊何小仙了”……。

TT: "Well, then the only thing will be to let He Xiaoxian have a look at him...."

Annotation: The doctor in "*Diary of a Madman*" is also surnamed *He*. This doctor's given name, Xiaoxian, means something like "junior immortal," an appropriate name for a Daoist physician.

Confronted with a name that integrates a common surname (He), Daoist imagery ("immortal"), and implicit intertextual design (the shared surname with the doctor in *Diary of a Madman*), Lyell refrains from domesticating it into an easily recognizable generic label such as "Doctor He." Instead, he preserves the transliterated form "He Xiaoxian" in the main text, thereby maintaining its irreducible cultural specificity and presenting it to English readers as a culturally marked signifier.

The subsequent annotation performs a crucial mediating function. It first identifies the surname linkage to the doctor in *Diary of a Madman*, revealing Lu Xun's subtle intertextual construction and restoring an aspect of authorial craftsmanship that would otherwise remain invisible. It then provides an etymological and cultural explanation of "Xiaoxian," glossed as "junior immortal," and explicitly notes its appropriateness for a Daoist physician. This concise clarification links the literal meaning of the name to its cultural role, enabling readers to understand that "xian" is not a decorative epithet but a culturally loaded term associated with Daoist healing practices. At the same time, it gestures toward popular beliefs that imbue Daoist doctors with supernatural abilities, reflecting vernacular reverence for such figures.

In sum, when confronted with elements specific to China's state systems, social culture, and traditional philosophy, William Lyell consistently adopts a dual strategy. At the textual level, he employs foreignizing techniques, such as transliteration and stylistic estrangement, to preserve the formal and conceptual heterogeneity of key cultural references. At the paratextual level, he provides historically grounded and culturally informed annotations that construct the cognitive framework necessary for understanding. This approach both safeguards the autonomy and subjectivity of the source culture within the translation and prevents heterogeneity from hardening into unintelligibility. As a result, readers situated within a dominant target-culture context are encouraged to move beyond their habitual interpretive presuppositions and to recognize, comprehend, and ultimately respect an alternative civilizational logic for understanding and articulating the world.

6. Positive Acceptance among Overseas Readers

As a well-established book review platform under Amazon, Goodreads hosts a large and diverse global user base. Since its launch in 2007, it has grown into one of the world's largest international reading communities. By 2023, Goodreads had accumulated approximately 125 million users, catalogued over 3.5 billion books, and collected nearly 100 million user reviews. Readers evaluate books through both star ratings and written comments. Although the majority of its users are based in English-speaking countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, a substantial number are located across Europe, Asia, South America, and the Middle East. The platform's massive user base, heterogeneous readership, and relatively mature rating and recommendation mechanisms together ensure the representativeness and reliability of its review data.

Covering a wide range of genres and allowing readers from different backgrounds to comment freely, Goodreads can reflect, with relative fidelity, the actual ecology of the overseas dissemination and reception of Chinese literature. Moreover, as the platform does not function primarily as a direct sales channel, user feedback is less susceptible to commercial incentives and tends to focus more closely on the textual content itself. For this reason, Goodreads has increasingly been regarded by scholars as an important window through which to examine the genuine reception of literary works among overseas readers (Thelwall et al., 2017). Overall, reader reviews on Goodreads can, to a considerable extent, offer an objective indication of a work's global circulation, level of acceptance, and cultural impact.

On Goodreads, Lyell's translation has received a total of 2,153 ratings, of which approximately 70 percent are four stars or above, indicating a notably high proportion of positive evaluations. In addition, the translation has attracted 223 written reviews, providing a substantive textual corpus for a more detailed analysis of reader reception. The following discussion is based on these reviews.

Contrary to the traditional assumption that the retention of highly heterogeneous Chinese elements—such as state systems, social customs, and traditional philosophy—would impair English readers' reading experience and thus hinder the overseas reception of Chinese literature, a considerable number of readers were not only untroubled by Lyell's foreignizing strategies but in fact demonstrated clear acceptance and even appreciation of them. More significantly, many readers developed a deeper understanding of, and interest in, Chinese society and its historical context through the cultural explanations provided in the annotations.

First, with regard to historical state systems, although the background knowledge required is largely unfamiliar to overseas readers, the reviews show little evidence of resistance. Instead, readers often expressed intellectual curiosity stimulated by Lyell's annotations. Comments such as "a fascinating view of the author's world," "a society that has disappeared," and "a window into certain everyday traditions of Chinese culture" suggest that readers were not only intrigued by these unfamiliar systems but also capable of recognizing that the historical contexts sustaining them have long since vanished. Some readers went further, identifying the text's exposure of structural features of Chinese governance, particularly the rigidity of the late imperial examination system. One reviewer, for instance, referred to "the stultifying demands of the Imperial Examination system forcing students to memorise dead classics," indicating that, with the aid of annotation, the reader accurately grasped Lu Xun's critical stance toward the examination system.

Second, when encountering markedly different social and cultural elements, readers did not experience the comprehension barriers often presupposed by stereotypical views. Instead, these elements were frequently perceived as a productive cultural encounter. Reviews describing the stories as offering "snapshots of daily life" or "unique insight into Chinese culture and thought" demonstrate that readers regarded such elements as valuable cognitive entry points. Even when faced with highly localized customs, some readers remarked that "The society described by Lu Xun is vastly different from the one I'm living in, which only makes it more interesting to read about." This suggests that cultural distance and unfamiliarity did not function as obstacles but were transformed into a key source of reading pleasure and exploratory motivation.

Finally, at the level of traditional philosophy, readers—supported by Lyell's annotations—not only understood references to Confucian classics but also perceived the irony and critique embedded in Lu Xun's deployment of these traditions. Some explicitly characterized the work as "a critique of Confucian society as primitive and inhumane," or as "a ruthless indictment of feudal Chinese society, of those 'Confucian' values which, behind a facade of respect and filial piety, conceal a system of blind obedience and suffocation of the individual." Through their readings, readers articulated Lu Xun's portrayal of Confucian values under feudal society as embodying "blind obedience" and the "suppression of the individual." This demonstrates that overseas readers not only accepted the philosophical otherness presented in the text but also engaged in active critical reflection under its guidance, thereby apprehending the deeper cultural and social critique at the core of Lu Xun's works.

In sum, the reception of Lyell's translation among overseas readers indicates that the combined strategy of foreignizing translation and scholarly annotation successfully transformed institutional, cultural, and intellectual heterogeneity into accessible—and even thought-provoking—paths of understanding. Rather than retreating in the face of cultural differences,

readers, guided by annotation, were able to bridge cognitive gaps and arrive at a nuanced comprehension of Lu Xun's literary intentions and social critique. To this extent, the case challenges the long-held assumption that the retention of cultural heterogeneity necessarily obstructs reception, and it offers a valuable reference for future practices of cross-cultural literary translation and dissemination.

7. Conclusion

Within the broader project of promoting Chinese culture globally, the translation of Chinese literature plays a pivotal role, placing significant responsibility on literary translators. Traditionally, overseas readers' capacity to engage with cultural heterogeneity has often been underestimated, resulting in an overemphasis on domestication and on producing translations that privilege naturalness and fluency. However, the positive reception of William Lyell's translation—marked by a relatively high degree of retained heterogeneity—demonstrates that cultural difference in itself does not constitute an obstacle to dissemination. When supported by appropriate and effective supplementary strategies, target-language readers are not only capable of understanding such heterogeneity, but may also develop a deeper and more critically informed appreciation of the source culture, thereby enabling genuinely meaningful cross-cultural exchange.

Accordingly, future practices in the outward translation of Chinese literature should move beyond habitual underestimations of overseas readers' acceptability. By employing suitable auxiliary means and retaining Chinese cultural elements in a judicious and effective manner, translators can open up new perspectives for the outward translation of Chinese literature and contribute to the more effective global dissemination of Chinese culture.

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