
RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Comparative Study on Three Chinese-English Translations of Culture-Loaded Words in *Shui Hu Zhuan*

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ABSTRACT

Shui Hu Zhuan is one of the four great classical novels of Chinese literature, and the cornucopia of culture-loaded words contained in it has now become the focus of translation research. This study delves into the translation of culture-loaded words in *Shui Hu Zhuan* by meticulously examining three renowned English translations by Sidney Shapiro, Pearl S. Buck, and Dent Young. Adopting a qualitative research approach with descriptive interpretation, the study conducts a descriptive comparative analysis of the translations from four dimensions: official-title words, religious-related words, historical-culture words, and nicknames. From the perspective of functional equivalence, it is found that Buck's version frequently employs literal translation. Dent-Young's version is characterized by strong readability and flexibility that transcends rigid translation strategies. Shapiro, on the other hand, skillfully combines liberal translation with literal translation, demonstrating a nuanced approach that captures the essence of the original text.

KEYWORDS

Shui Hu Zhuan; Chinese-English translation; Culture-loaded words.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 25 September 2024

PUBLISHED: 04 October 2024

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2024.7.10.7

1. Introduction

Shui Hu Zhuan is not only one of the four great classical novels in China but also the earliest novels written in the vernacular language in Chinese history (Li,2022). It has become one of the most epic works in Chinese literature because of its magnificent content, ups and downs in plot, lofty themes, and heartfelt sentiments. Meanwhile, *Shui Hu Zhuan* has been translated into English, German, French, Russian, Japanese, and dozens of foreign countries version, which has exerted a profound influence on the art of novels around the world, especially in East Asian countries, and has become an important bridge between Chinese and foreign cultures.

Meanwhile, culture-loaded words refer to words, phrases, or idioms used to express something unique to a culture (Liu, 2019). A notch-top translation of culture-loaded words should enable foreign readers to fully understand the semantic and sentiment content of the word and deeply feel the essence of its language. In the past, representative translators such as Pearl S. Buck, Sidney Shapiro, John-Dent Yound, and Alex-Dent Young would intentionally translate by combining domestication and foreignization in parallel, but also had their shortcomings.

Therefore, this paper will select the translations of Pearl S. Buck, Sidney Shapiro, John-Dent Young, and Alex-Dent Young as the reference translations and focus on comparing and analyzing the different translations of the same culture-loaded words. As translation scholars, the authors will take Eugene A. Nida's functional equivalence theory as the basic analytical theory, combining literal and liberal translation, domestication, and foreignization translation methods, to propose our conclusions on how to translate the culture-loaded words in *Shui Hu Zhuan* in a more comprehensive and accurate way.

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2. Literature Review

Shui Hu Zhuan, as the novel includes one of most abundant Chinese cultural elements in Chinese history, contains a large number of culture-loaded words that carry Chinese long history tradition and have profound meanings. Therefore, these culture-loaded words usually have difficulty finding equivalent meaning expressions in the target language. Among the famous translators of Chinese-English translation of *Shui Hu Zhuan* in the past, Pearl S. Buck usually adopts literal translation and foreignization ways to translate culture-loaded words, while Sidney Shapiro, John-Dent Young, and Alex-Dent Young often combine literal and liberal translation and utilize domestication methods. These different ways of translation can reflect prominent differences in conveying elements such as metaphors, symbols, and emotions of the culture-loaded words, which makes the target readers' understandings quite different. Thus, in this essay, based on Eugene A. Nida's translation theory, the author will compare and analyze the relevance of three different translation texts of the same culture-loaded words in *Shui Hu Zhuan* and provide our own translation strategies for the culture-loaded words in order completely and accurately convey its connotations and emotions.

3. Methodology

Eugene A. Nida's early classification of culture-loaded words has gained wider application. He divided it into five major categories, including ecological, material, social, religious, and linguistic culture-loaded words (Nida, 1964). Therefore, this article summarizes four specific categories of culture-loaded words from *Shui Hu Zhuan* corresponding to Nida's classification for analysis. These include "Ancient Chinese official title words" in the social category, "character nickname words" in the linguistic category, "Chinese religious-related words" in the religious category, and "Chinese historical-culture words" in the material category.

Meanwhile, functional equivalence theory emphasizes using the most appropriate, natural, and equivalent language to convey the semantics and information of the original text (Xing, 2023). Its flexible theoretical form is more suitable for analyzing the completeness and accuracy of culture-loaded word translation. Therefore, it is chosen as the basic analysis theory in this paper.

Since the translation research of culture-loaded words in *Shui Hu Zhuan* is a very novel field, the author has found very few dozens of related translation research data on websites such as Web of Science. Hence, the author's citations mainly come from academic journal articles on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and some master's and doctoral theses from well-known universities in China, but ensure that all citation content in the article is provided with English source and back translation text.

Furthermore, a qualitative methodology is employed in this study. The author selected the three most authoritative Chinese-English translations of *Shui Hu Zhuan* for analysis and collected and organized part of the background information for these three translated versions in order to more clearly reflect the translation ideas and features of each translator. This will help us to analyze in a more targeted and in-depth manner and propose more comprehensive and objective viewpoints. For details, please refer to the following table.

Book Title	Translator	Publication date	Format	Publish institution	Translator achievement	Translation version feature	Translation version recognition
All men are brothers.	Pearl S. Buck (1892-1973)	2006 (Original publish time:1933)	(720 pages) (Estimate180,000 words) (ISBN-13:978-1559213035)	New York Moyer Bell Co. Ltd	Famous-American writer and translator. The only female writer to win both the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize simultaneously.	Literal translation is the main approach, and foreignization is commonly used, making TT detailed and comprehensive.	the designated teaching material for Chinese literature courses in most American schools. (Zhao&Zhong, 2022)
Outlaws of the Marsh	Sidney Shapiro (1915-2014)	2001 (Original publish time:1980)	(2149 Pages) (Estimate537,250 words) (ISBN-13: 9787119016627)	Beijing Foreign Languages Press	Renowned-Chinese translator. He awarded TAC's Lifetime Achievement	often combine literal and liberal translation for domestication translation,	The most widely recognized version in the translation

					Award in Translation in 2011.	making TT accurate and vivid.	community today.
The Marshes of Mount Liang	John Dent-Young & Alex Dent-Young	2014 (Original publish time: 1994)	(2632 pages) (Estimate 550,000 words) (5 volumes, bilingual Chinese & English) (ISBN-13: 9787544636643)	Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press	A pair of father and son, famous British translators. Father John graduated from Cambridge University and is proficient in multiple languages.	more inclined towards literal translation and domestication in a modern translation approach, making TT has not too many translation traces.	Easy to understand and suitable for all ages, especially popular in the UK.

4. Analysis of Culture-loaded words in *Shui hu Zhuan*

4.1 Ancient Chinese official title words

(1) 都头 (chief)

当日便参武松做了步兵都头。(He joined Wu Sung as the head of the infantry on that day.)

Pearl S. Buck: **Officer**

At once commanded Wu Sung was made an officer among the infantry.

Sidney Shapiro: **Constable**

That very day commissioning, Wu Song a constable in the police force.

John Dent-Young & Alex Dent-Young: **Captain**

Appointing Wu Song with immediate effect a captain of foot.

“都头” was originally referred to as the commander-in-chief of various armies in the ancient Dynasty (Shi, 2021), with duties similar to those of the police, mainly responsible for maintaining local police order and was a low-ranking officer.

Buck opted for ‘officer’ with broad semantics and literal translation, faithful to the original text, while Young’s ‘captain’ also has a wider range of semantic concepts. Both of these words are close to foreignization, weakening the cultural connotation of “都头” in the translation but improving the comprehension and acceptance of Western readers (Wu, 1997). In addition, in terms of the Cambridge Dictionary, Shapiro’s translation ‘Constable’ specifically refers to police officers with low social status in other countries such as Britain, which is closer to the original meaning of the lower official positions of “都头”. As a result, the author believes that Shapiro’s literal and domestication translation of ‘constable’ is more accurate in conveying the original semantic meaning and background connotation of the word, which is more in line with the theory of functional equivalence. Meanwhile, we also conclude that when translating culture-loaded words with significant connotations, considering and combining the social and cultural background of the source and target language can make the translation more exact and clear.

(2) 禁军教头 (Head of the Prohibited Army)

东京八十万禁军教头林冲 (Tokyo eight hundred thousand forbidden army instructor Lin Chong)

Buck: Ling Ch’ung, **instructor** of eight thousand men in the eastern capital

Shapiro: Lin Chong, **arms instructor** of the Imperial Guards, Eastern Capital

John Dent-Young&Alex Dent-Young: Lin Chong, **instructor** of the eight thousand imperial guards

Firstly, “**教头**” in the Song Dynasty was called a person who taught martial arts with duties similar to that of a coach. The position of ‘arms instructor of the imperial guard’ was equivalent to that of a lieutenant or sergeant in modern times. Nonetheless, because there was no official position of ‘instructor’ in the official system of the Song Dynasty, it was actually more symbolic than an actual official position (Zhao&Long, 2023).

Buck used domestication and literal methods to translate “**禁军**” as ‘men.’ It perhaps explains it from the meaning perspective that the army includes many ordinary people, which is more understandable for foreign readers (Liu, 2013). However, the forbidden army in ancient China was an established army that defended the capital or the palace, which was still distinguished from citizens. Therefore, despite Shapiro and Young’s ‘Imperial Guards’ being translated literally, but more exact. Nonetheless, Shapiro’s and Young’s respective omissions of “eight thousand” and “eastern capital” in their translations are also a little bit inappropriate, as it is somewhat domestication, lacking the grandeur of the official position.

Thus, the author combines the techniques of all three versions and gives our own translation. “Lin Chong, arms instructor of the eight hundred thousand imperial guards in the eastern capital.” The author believes that this translation is more in line with the stylistic and functional equivalence and also allows foreign readers to deeply comprehend the role and semantic connotation of this official title.

4.2 Character nickname words

(1)花和尚鲁智深 (The Hua Monk Lu Zhishen)

Buck: The **Tattooed Priest**

Buck chose the word “tattooed” to embody the tattoo on Lu Zhishen’s body, which corresponds to the Chinese character “**花**” (花) in the original text “Hua Heshang,” embodying that Lu Zhishen’s appearance is out of the ordinary. Meanwhile, though the word “priest” is not exactly equivalent to the word “monk,” it can convey the image of a religious figure in the English context, although it is more related to Christianity. However, in the original language culture, the English word “priest” refers to a person who is qualified to perform religious duties and ceremonies in the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox Churches. In the book, Lu Zhishen is not a monk who strictly obeys the interdictions and taboos of his religion. He eats meat and drinks a lot, which means that he is not an eligible priest. Under the guidance of functional equivalence theory, the translation should maintain the semantics and style of the original text as much as possible. In this translation, though “priest” has a certain deviation semantically, its acceptability in culture ensures the integrity of information delivery. In addition, this translation also relates to the translation strategy of “domestication,” making the translated conform to the cultural background and reading habits of English target readers.

Shapiro: The **Tattooed Monk**

Shapiro’s translation is direct and clear, which not only retains the key information of “tattooed” but also clearly points out Lu Zhishen’s identity as a monk, avoiding the misunderstanding that may be caused by the word “priest.” However, though “The Tattooed Monk” accurately conveys the meaning of the original text, its cultural charm and rhetorical effect are slightly bland, which cannot fully show the lively and agile feature of the name “Hua Heshang.” Besides, this translation commendably embodies the “formal equivalence” and “dynamic equivalence” in the theory of functional equivalence, retaining the formal characteristics of the original text, as well as ensuring the natural and smooth of the translated text in the target language, English. At the same time, this translation also embodies the translation strategy of “foreignization.”

Dent-Young: The **Flowery Monk**

The word “flowery” has the meaning of “gorgeous” and “splendid” in English, so the translation of “Flowery Monk” may easily make people misunderstand that Lu Zhishen is a gentle and devout monk, but in fact, his image is bold and uninhibited, and not punctilious. Furthermore, the word “flowery” doesn’t have a direct connection with the key information of “tattoo.” Under the guidance of functional equivalence theory, this translation is deficient in the aspect of conveying the image of the original text, which cannot fully embody the cultural connotation of “Hua Heshang.” Additionally, this translation embodies the translation method of “free translation” to a larger extent, namely focusing on conveying the meaning of the original text rather than the form. However, in the process of translating, an excessive free degree caused the distortion of the original information.

(2) 母夜叉孙二娘 (The Hag Sun Erniang)

母夜叉孟州道卖人肉 (The hag sell human flesh in Mengzhou Road)

Buck: **The-monster of the sea** sells human flesh on the road to Meng Chou

Shapiro: **The Witch** of Mengzhou Road Sells Drugged Wine

Dent-young: On the Mengzhou road, **the Ogress** sells meat pies

In *Shui Hu Zhuan*, "母夜叉" is Sun Erniang's nickname. Sun Erniang is a fierce and daring female warrior who used to sell human flesh to her husband. In Chinese culture, "母夜叉" is a female ghost who usually hurt and kill people.

We found that Buck's translation tends towards literal translation, trying to preserve the direct meaning of the source text. It attempts to translate "母夜叉" into a similar concept in English and convey the ferocious characteristic of Sun Erniang. However, due to cultural differences, direct translation can sometimes lead to bias or misunderstandings. As "母夜叉" has a specific cultural meaning in Chinese, which means a fierce and barbarous woman, while "SHE-MONSTER OF THE SEA" refers to the monster living in the sea. Although this translation is accurate in terms of content, it may lack the cultural nuance of this nickname.

On the other hand, Shapiro used domestication in his translation to improve its accessibility and readability for English readers. Shapiro translated "母夜叉" as "The Witch"; it effectively captures the essence of this character's wicked and mysterious nature since the word "witch" is often used in English to describe a woman with evil powers. The translation is easy for English readers to understand, but it might ignore the uniqueness and historical background of "母夜叉" in Chinese culture.

Dent-young used foreignization to preserve the cultural and linguistic uniqueness of the source text. Foreignization emphasizes preserving the exotic flavor and cultural characteristics of the original work, enabling readers to encounter the cultural differences of the original more directly (Wang, 2002). Although "ogress" may be an uncommon English term, it accurately conveys the fierce and scaring image of "母夜叉" in Chinese. From the perspective of functional equivalence, this translation allows English readers to encounter cultural differences and appreciate the uniqueness of the nickname while still understanding its general meaning.

4.3 Chinese religious-related words

(1) 戒刀 (Buddhist monk's knife, not used for killing)

胸跨了戒刀，提了禅杖，顶了衣包，便出寨来。(With the knife across his chest, his staff, and his bag of clothes, he came out of the fortress.)

Shapiro: Sagacious hung the knife at his waist, took up his staff, and left the stronghold with the sack on his head.

Shapiro translated "戒刀" into "knife," which used the translation strategy of domestication. In English, "knife" is a general vocabulary, so this translation cannot convey the Chinese cultural connotation of "戒刀" as an exclusive item for Buddhist monks, which, to a certain degree, caused the loss of cultural information.

Dent-Young: ...took up his **sword** and staff, shouldered his bundle, and left the mountain retreat.

Dent-Young translated "戒刀" into "sword," which is also a translation strategy of domestication. In English, "sword" usually refers to a long sword or saber used in combat. In Chinese culture, "戒刀" is not allowed to kill lives and is used as a specific daily necessity that is carried by Buddhist monks to cut cloth or clothes. This translation didn't convey this meaning, which also caused the loss of cultural information.

Buck: ...he hung his dagger to his girdle and took up his long staff and put on his head kerchief.

Buck translated "戒刀" into "dagger," which, compared to the former two translations, is a translation much closer to the original text. In English, "dagger" usually refers to a short sword or dirk, which is closer to the characteristic of "戒刀" as a small, short, and sharp weapon and can better convey the cultural connotation of the original text. "Dagger," yet still doesn't have the specific mild meaning that is contained by "戒刀" in Buddhism. Therefore, this translation also caused a certain degree of cultural information

loss. The translation of Shapiro and Dent-Young may also relate to the strategy of simplification, namely simplifying the culture-loaded words in the original text to make the translation easier to be understood by the target language reader. However, such a simplification also led to the loss of cultural information. Although there is still a certain degree of cultural information loss, Buck's translation has a better effect in retaining the cultural connotation of the original text, which may have something to do with her attempts to find a balance between domestication and foreignization.

4.4 Chinese historical-culture words

(1) 乐极生悲 · 否极泰来 (extreme joy turns to sorrow, the worst comes true, idiom)

Buck: "When joy reaches its height, it is sorrow's turn : when ill luck reaches its limit, good luck comes in."

Buck's translation is straightforward and effectively conveys the original meaning. He employs the repetitive structure "when..., ...," which is neatly organized and easy to understand. However, the phrase "it is sorrow's turn" lacks fluency and may not fully capture the deeper, logical implications of the transition to sorrow.

Shapiro: "Ecstasy begets tragedy, from misery good fortune springs."

Shapiro's translation is notably literary and poetic, employing powerful words like "Ecstasy" and "misery" to emphasize the contrast, thereby enhancing the impact of his rendition. However, the word "Ecstasy" in English often connotes extreme euphoria typically associated with drugs or religious fervor, which may not align precisely with the Chinese term "乐极." According to the theory of equivalence, Shapiro's translation captures the deeper meaning of the original text. Despite using a technique of partial dissimilation, it remains consistent with typical English expressions.

Dent-Young: "Pleasure contains the seed of sadness; in misfortune, relief is born."

This metaphorical translation not only retains the original sentence's antithetical structure but also effectively conveys its deeper meaning through the metaphorical terms "seed" and "germ." This approach aligns with the theory of equivalence, achieving lexical, syntactic, and stylistic correspondence. It also fits well with English linguistic conventions, making it more comprehensible and acceptable to English readers. However, the term "relief" in the phrase "in misfortune relief is born" might be misinterpreted as simply "relief" or "deliverance" rather than implying "good luck" or a "turnaround." Finally, while Young's translation tends toward regularisation, it does not significantly emphasize foreignizing elements.

(2) 三十六计 · 走为上计 (Of the Thirty-Six Stratagems, fleeing is best.)

Buck : "...Of the thirty-six ways of escape, the best is to run away."(C17, P158)

Buck successfully translates "thirty-six ways" as "thirty-six ways of escape," effectively linking the concept of strategy to escape in the original text. His phrase "the best is to run away" clearly and directly articulates the idea that fleeing is the optimal strategy. However, the term "ways of escape" might mislead readers into thinking that all strategies involve running away. The "Thirty-six Stratagems" encompass a broad spectrum of tactics and wisdom, not solely escape; thus, the translation does not fully capture the literary and cultural nuances of the original text. Additionally, while Buck's translation remains true to the content and conveys the primary message of the original, his approach of regularization, which incorporates common English expressions, makes the translation more accessible to English-speaking audiences.

Shapiro : "Of all the thirty-six possible solutions, the best one is— leave. " (C18, P176)

Shapiro's translation clearly identifies "leave" as the optimal choice among the "thirty-six." The term "solutions" aptly captures the essence of "stratagem" as a strategy or solution, more so than "ways of escape." However, translating "leave" as simply "leave" might lack the nuance of the original word "go," which implies a voluntary retreat or seeking a better opportunity, not just departure. Overall, Shapiro's translation stays true to the deeper meanings of the original text and uses a strategy of regularization. This approach, coupled with paraphrasing, enhances the translation's accessibility for English readers.

Dent-Young : "Of thirty-six strategies, flight is always the best."

Firstly, the term "strategies" aptly captures the variety of "stratagems" found in the original text better than "solutions" or "ways of escape." Dent-Young's choice of the word "flight" more accurately embodies the concept of strategic retreat compared to "run

away" and "leave" from the earlier translations. It effectively conveys the notion of an active, deliberate withdrawal while seeking better opportunities. Secondly, Dent-Young's translation aligns closely with the original text in terms of deeper meanings. He primarily employs a regularization strategy but also incorporates contextual translation. This method uses common English expressions, enhancing the translation's clarity and making it more accessible to English-speaking audiences.

5. Results and Discussion

The three authors used different translation methods. We found that Buck used literal translation most frequently. She may keep nearly all the contents of the original, but sometimes it is difficult for Western readers to understand (Jia, 2012). On the other hand, the translation concept of Dent-Young's is the opposite of Buck's. Dent-Young wants to make the readers feel that they are reading an original novel, not a translated book. The characteristics of his version are strong readability, not limited to translation strategies, but focusing on the purpose of translation. Additionally, Shapiro combined liberal translation with literal translation skillfully, making the translation more faithful and understandable to English readers. His translations generally adopt foreignization to give the readers a real feeling of living in ancient China (Li, 2022).

Therefore, to successfully achieve cultural transplantation, translators should adopt many different strategies that are appropriate for the original text. The choice of translation style and method depends on the target readers and the purpose of the translation (Newmark, 2001). Translators can use the combination of literal translation and liberal translation, like the methods adopted by Shapiro, to produce a more accurate and readable translation. Moreover, translating culture-loaded words requires delving deep into the cultural context of the source language (Xiang, 2016). It is crucial to comprehend the history, traditions, values, and beliefs associated with the word. Translators can employ domestication and foreignization flexibly to achieve cultural equivalence as much as possible. This can help translators to convey the essence of the word and its cultural significance.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis uses functional equivalence theory as the translation framework. It offers a comparative analysis of some culture-loaded words translated by Buck, Dent-Young, and Shapiro from *Shui Hu Zhuan*. We classify them into four categories: official-title words, religious-related words, historical-culture words, and nicknames. Descriptions and interpretations of these translations in the case analyses provide readers with a clear picture of the respective translation styles and methods the three translators have.

Lastly, although this thesis made a comparative case analysis of three different translations of Chinese culture-loaded words, there are still many things that need to be improved. Firstly, the analysis may be limited by the scope of the study. While the culture-loaded words in *Shui Hu Zhuan* are rich and diverse, focusing on only three translations may not reflect the full range of translation strategies. Future improvements include expanding the scope of the study to delve into a broader range of translation versions of *Shui Hu Zhuan* and even other similar Chinese literary works to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the translation of culture-loaded words. Besides, subjective factors are inevitably involved in the selection of translation cases. It is better to collect all the culture-loaded words in the three versions and then categorize them. In this way, the conclusion drawn will be more scientific and objective.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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