



Research on the C-E Translation of Folk Culture-specific Items Under the Perspective of Eco-translation's Multi-dimensional Transformations—A Case Study on Folk Culture Text of Hubei Province

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Abstract

As China continues to modernize, there is an increasing need to develop a Chinese discourse system that resonates effectively on the global stage. As a key component of Chinese traditional culture, folk customs offer valuable insights into the lifestyle, beliefs, and production practices of the Chinese people. The translation of folk culture-specific items (FCSIs) plays a crucial role in helping international audiences understand the nuances of Chinese society. This paper focuses on the challenges of translating FCSIs from Hubei province, a region with a rich cultural history, particularly its Jingchu culture. The study explores the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions of transformation, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach that incorporates techniques such as transliteration with explanation, amplification, and semantic adaptation. The paper argues that effective translation requires not only a deep understanding of the source culture and language but also an awareness of the target readers' expectations and linguistic habits. By integrating these dimensions, translators can preserve the essence of Hubei folk culture while ensuring accessibility and readability for a global audience.

Keywords

Folk culture; Eco-translation theory; Culture-specific items

1. Introduction

With the advancement of Chinese modernization, it is necessary to build Chinese discourse in the international community. In order to make the voice of China heard, and present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China to the world, translators need to spare no effort in telling Chinese stories. Folk customs, as an embodiment of Chinese traditional culture with over 5000 years of history, present Chinese people's life mode and production. Its translation can greatly help the internationals better understand China.

1.1 Hubei Folk Culture

There is a saying widely accepted by the academic circle: "The development and combination of the Yangzi River Culture represented by Jingchu culture and the northern Huanghe River Culture established the main pillars of Chinese civilization." Jingchu in the above sentence is today's Hubei province. With a history of over 2000 years, Jingchu

culture has developed a great many material and non-material cultures, and folk customs are one of them. Folk culture (folktales, folklore, etc.) can be understood as something that is shared first among a group of people and then with the more general population. It is a form of identification derived from longstanding cultural practices. Compared with other cultural forms, folk culture is closer to people's ordinary life and involves a wider range, which is more intriguing for foreigners.

1.2 Features of Folk Culture Text

China's folk culture covers a myriad of contents, and its classification is often uncertain, with various categories interwoven. However, two widely accepted classifications are presented here. Tao Lifan (2003) integrated the classification of folk culture into three major aspects: material, social, and spiritual, further subdividing spiritual folk customs into oral language folk customs, behavioral inheritance folk customs, and spiritual belief folk customs. Zhong Jingwen (2010) roughly divided folk phenomena into four parts: material folk customs (such as production and dietary customs), social folk customs (social organization and institutional customs, festival customs, and life ceremony customs), spiritual folk customs (such as folk beliefs and folk arts), and linguistic folk customs (including folk language and folk literature).

2. Studies on Translation of Culture-specific Items

2.1 Culture-specific Items and Its Classification

Javier Franco Aixelá (2007) first proposed the concept of Culture-Specific Items. He defined Culture-Specific Items as items within a text whose significance and implied meanings present challenges during translation to another text. These challenges arise either because the item does not exist in the target culture or because it holds a different meaning in the cultural context of the target audience. According to Eugene Nida (1945), CSIs were divided into five classifications: ecological, material, social, religious, and language culture. Based on Nida's categorization, Peter Newmark (1988) further developed it into ecology, public life, social life, personal life, customs and pursuits, and private passions. Domestic scholars also have their own understandings. Hongwei Chen (2000) classified it into three types: material culture, institutional culture, and spiritual culture. Mingwu Xu (2004), however, categorized it into seven sorts: conceptive model, folk customs, history, cultural background, region, religion, and body language and gesture.

Based on the above classification of folk customs and CSIs, the writer concluded the classification of FCSIs (Folk Culture-Specific Items): 1) material FCSIs (related to production and dietary customs), 2) social FCSIs (related to festival and life ceremony customs), 3) spiritual FCSIs (related to beliefs and arts), 4) linguistic FCSIs (related to language and literature).

2.2 Translation of Culture-specific Items

Various translation theories have been explored in the study of cultural-specific items (CSIs). For example, Xinguang Zhuo and Jing Wang (2007) applied Verschueren's adaptability theory to the translation of CSIs, while Yukun Pu and Xiaofeng Lan (2009) introduced Eugene Nida's theory of functional equivalence in the Chinese-to-English translation of Chinese CSIs. Yajun Liu (2014) analyzed CSIs in the *Serials of Lu Xun's Novel* through the lens of Skopos theory. Suyu Wang (2019) analyzed and discussed the translation of culturally specific items in two versions of Teahouse based on 11 translation strategies specific to Acculturation Theory. She argued that both translators focused on introducing Chinese culture to Western readers when dealing with culturally specific items in the Teahouse, generally aiming to preserve the unique characteristics and connotations of Chinese culture. Kaiyue Deng and Zhikun Bao (2020) explored the translation of culture-loaded terms from the perspective of Memetics, analyzing aspects such as meme literal translation, meme-free translation, and meme annotation. The theory of meme translation provides a model of information replication for the English translation of Chinese culture-loaded terms. Yan Yang (2021) paid particular attention to the phenomenon of cultural omission in the translation of folk culture. She argued that the translation of folk culture texts should follow two principles: (1) appropriately supplementing omitted cultural elements; (2) avoiding simplistic and crude replacements. She also conducted a more detailed analysis of translation compensation methods. Xiaolu Yuan and Tong Zhao (2022) analyzed the English translation of culture-loaded terms in Liu Qing's *Builders of a New Life* from the perspective of Eco-translatology.

In the context of folk culture texts, several scholars have also used eco-translation theory as a framework for

analyzing different cultural texts. Notably, Wenbin Wang (2016) examined Manchu folk culture, and Lijuan Wang and Ran Wang (2012) focused on the folk culture of Guangdong province. However, there is a gap in the research concerning folk culture texts from Hubei province. This study aims to fill this gap by specifically examining the CSIs within Hubei folk culture.

3. Multi-dimensional Transformations of Eco-translation

Eco-translation, first raised by Chinese translator Gengshen Hu (2008) in his passage *The Interpretation to Eco-translatology*, is an interdisciplinary product combined with theories from ecology and translation. It is based on the adaptation and selection from Darwin's evolution theory. Professor Hu (2008) believes the paradigm of Eco-translation is "Translation equals Adaptation plus Selection" and thinks there is a sequence chain from translation to nature. He also describes the process of adaptation and selection in translation (See Figure 1) and introduces the concept of translational eco-environment, which is a world among original text, original language, and target language system. According to the adaptation and selection process, the translator is the center of translation and the process of translation is the "adaptation" to the translational eco-environment around the original text and the "selection" to the translational eco-environment around the translator.

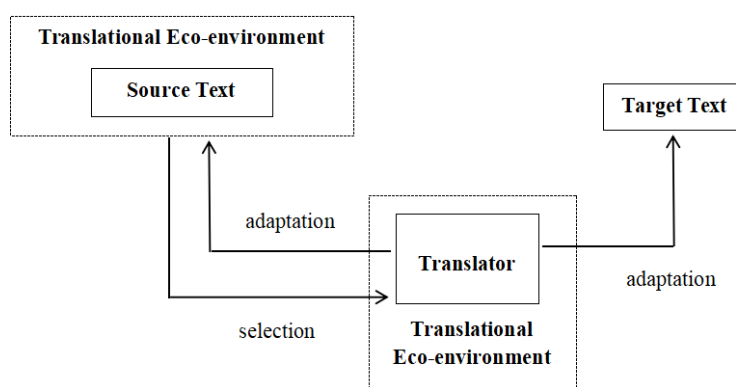


Figure 1. The process of adaptation and selection in translation.

Based on the above framework, Prof. Hu generalizes three translation strategies under the principles of multi-adaptation and selective adaptation. Specifically, they are transformed in linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions (Gengsheng H, 2011). For the linguistic dimension, the translator focuses on the adaptive selection and transformation of the linguistic form and its language, which may happen in different aspects and grades. For the cultural dimension, the transmission and interpretation of two different cultures' connotations are given great attention. It emphasizes the differences between source culture and target culture. For communicative translation, the communicative purpose is the top concern, which means the translator needs to place emphasis on whether the communicative purpose of the source text has been properly presented in the target text.

4. Application of Multidimensional Transformation in C-E Translation of FCSIs

Eco-translation, mixed with wisdom of ancient Chinese philosophy and theories from natural science in the West, echoes the purpose of folk CSIs translation which aims to promote great Chinese traditional culture to the world and be recognized by the international community.

4.1 Transformation at Linguistic Dimension

Adaptive transformation at the linguistic dimension emphasizes that the translator should pay much attention to linguistic forms from different levels like lexical, syntactical, and textual levels. However, the focus of this paper is FCSI and the textual level will not be discussed here.

Case 1

When the newborn is one month old, the family will hold a feast and invite guests to this celebration. In the

meantime, relatives are supposed to congratulate by gifting. And all the guests will be treated with four boiled eggs colored in red.

(Note: the source text can be found in the appendix)

From a lexical level, in this context, “gan qing” refers to the act of offering congratulations. It is a typical FCSI in Chinese society, especially for Hubei people who attach great importance to human relations. If someone held an event in his house, relatives and friends would visit him or her, bringing some money and gifts. In this process, gifting is the most significant part that will be registered in a book by the host. Therefore, the translator added “by gifting” to clarify the underlying meaning of it. From a syntactical level, owing to the language difference between Chinese and English, Chinese employs parataxis, while English employs hypotaxis. English focuses on the structure and integrity of each sentence, along with the cohesive devices within it. However, Chinese sentence expresses itself through its grammatical and logical relations. For the source text, the correspondence between the family and relatives does not show up in Chinese, while in English it must be presented. The addition of “in the meantime” embodies English sentence’s coherence.

Case 2

Firstly, fresh and tender Shehao, a kind of Chinese sweet wormwood usually taken as medicine, picked from the hills need to be gathered, washed, finely chopped, drained of bitterness, and dried. It is then mixed with wild garlic, dried bean curd, and cured meat and glutinous rice to concoct the savory shefan.

(Note: the source text can be found in the appendix)

According to Appiah, one barrier of translation is that there won’t be comprehensive equivalence in words’ literal meaning between two different languages. And the difference in geography and environment may contribute to this a lot. In this example, Shehao is a kind of local vegetable in Enshi county of Hubei province used to make Shefan, a traditional staple food. It is a material FCSI related to dietary customs. But there is no such vegetable in Western countries but *Artemisia absinthium*, known as wormwood which shares a similar shape with Shehao. From a linguistic dimension, this is a typical semantic gap and the translator has to look into the dictionary to first grasp its Chinese meaning and then find the corresponding English expressions. Finally, the translator decided to add an appositive to explain this peculiar species nurtured in China.

4.2 Transformation in the Cultural Dimension

Folk customs are greatly influenced by the local language and history, making them difficult for people from other history and culture contexts to understand. Adaptive transformation at the cultural dimension asks the translator to focus on the relation and shift between two different languages and spare no efforts to make the target language accessible to target readers.

Case 3

During the funeral procession, wearing a white headscarf and a red robe, the eldest grandson is required to sit on the coffin which is an implication of blessing the kid successful in his career—a practice rarely seen elsewhere.

(Note: the source text can be found in the appendix)

The Chinese custom of “zuo guan” literally translates to “sitting on the coffin.” To a Western reader, this might seem like a strange or even disturbing practice without further explanation. However, this is where cultural transformation plays an important role in bridging the gap, especially for FCSI. Actually, “zuo guan”, a social FCSI, is a homophonic pun in Chinese, carrying two meanings. One is the literal meaning of “sitting on the coffin” and another is the implication meaning “to secure an official position”. Because “zuo guan” is combined by two characters “zuo” and “guan”. “Zuo” means “sit down” or “to secure” and “guan” means “coffin” or “an official position”. In the context of this custom, people in Hubei believe that when a child sits on the coffin of their deceased grandfather, it is a way of securing a promising future, with the grandfather’s blessings ensuring success in the child’s career. The coffin, as a symbol of both death and authority, bridges these two ideas—death as a protective force and the coffin as a metaphor for securing one’s fate. Providing such contextual explanations is crucial, as it helps readers understand the cultural significance behind what might initially seem like an odd or morbid practice. By unpacking the symbolic meanings and the cultural beliefs surrounding death and the afterlife, the translator helps the audience appreciate the depth of the practice and its role in the community’s worldview.

Case 4

During the ritual, the kid should first pray to the ancestors of his second parents and then kowtow to his second parents to show respect.

(Note: the source text can be found in the appendix)

The literal translation of “xing li” is “salute”. However, salute is always an act of raising your right hand to your head as a sign of respect, usually done by a soldier to an officer, this literal translation, however, would not accurately convey the cultural and ritual significance of “xing li” in this context, particularly as a sign of respect shown by a subordinate to a superior. This literal translation, however, would not accurately convey the cultural and ritual significance of “xing li” in this context. In Chinese culture, “xing li” refers to a broader, more formal set of gestures that demonstrate respect within rituals or ceremonies, often including bowing or kneeling. Therefore, the term “salute” in the literal sense would be misleading. A more appropriate translation might involve a term that reflects the ritualized nature of the act, such as “pray” or “kowtow,” depending on the specific action described. This transformation not only changes the form but also respects the cultural function of the action—demonstrating that it is part of a spiritual or respectful act, rather than just a physical salute.

The translation uses the word “kowtow” to reflect the specific action in “fu mu li (rite to parents).” In Chinese culture, kowtowing is a highly respectful gesture, traditionally involving kneeling and touching one’s forehead to the ground, which conveys profound respect, especially to elders or parents. This is more than just a physical gesture; it carries deep cultural meaning, especially in the Confucian framework, where filial piety is considered one of the highest virtues. While “kowtow” may carry connotations of excessive subservience in Western cultures (e.g., “to show too much respect and be too willing to obey”), the translator adds “to show respect” to clarify the intention behind the action. The phrase “to show respect” emphasizes that the action is not about blind obedience or submission to authority, but rather about demonstrating reverence and honoring the elders—an important distinction in this cultural context.

These transformations reflect a conscious effort by the translator to navigate cultural differences. In Chinese culture, particularly within Confucianism, rituals are deeply symbolic and often include actions that represent respect, hierarchy, and moral order. In contrast, Western cultures may not have the same understanding or practice of such rites, so the translator must adapt the terminology and explanation to fit the expectations and cultural frame of the English-speaking audience.

4.3 Transformation in Communicative Dimension

Communication is the process by which people interact with each other through language and behavior. As an important medium of cultural exchange and transmission, folk culture text’s translation is a communicative channel between the author and the target reader. Adaptive transformation at the communicative dimension leaves the translator more room for operation and the translator needn’t strictly follow the source text’s linguistic form. Delivering its communicative purpose clearly is the main focus.

Case 5

When a household is blessed with a newborn boy, the neighbors will come to congratulate them, saying, “Congratulations on having a son!” The host responds humorously, “We just add another mouth to feed.”

(Note: the source text can be found in the appendix)

In the original Chinese context, the term “xue sheng” can carry a connotation beyond simply “student.” Influenced by Confucianism, Chinese society historically placed great value on education, and being a scholar was considered one of the highest accomplishments. In this traditional context, the phrase “tian le yi ge xue sheng” implies that the newborn child, especially a son, would have the potential to pursue education and, in the future, elevating the family’s status. In ancient China, only boys were typically given the opportunity to receive formal education, which was an exclusive privilege tied to gender and societal norms. However, in the English translation, the word “student” does not carry the same level of cultural or societal weight. To make the meaning clear for a Western audience, the translator opts for the more direct translation “son.” This shift preserves the intended meaning in a way that resonates with a broader audience, aligning the congratulations with the common Western practice of congratulating the parents on the birth of a son, without needing to reference education directly.

The second transformation involves the phrase “tao mi gun”, which literally means “beggar’s stick” and refers to a beggar who might use a stick as his crutch. In Chinese culture, this expression is used humorously or self-

deprecatingly to express that a new child brings additional financial or logistical burdens, akin to the needs of a beggar who must rely on others for sustenance. The phrase “tao mi gun” suggests that the family is not only gaining a new member but also taking on an additional responsibility, often framed in a lighthearted or humble manner. In the translation, the phrase is rendered as “another mouth to feed,” which is a straightforward expression familiar to English speakers. While the specific cultural imagery of the beggar’s stick is lost, the translator shifts the focus to the practical reality of having another child to care for.

Case 6

China harbors the age-old adage, “Food is the people’s paramount concern.”

(Note: the source text can be found in the appendix)

In example 6, one rhetorical device, metaphor, is applied in the source text. “min yi shi wei tian” means “people regards food as sky”, whereas “tain” refers to the sky. Actually, the item “min yi shi wei tian”, is selected from a historical book called Records of the Grand Historian, aiming to exhort Chinese emperors to make people’s livelihood the top concern. In Chinese culture, “sky” has profound significance, symbolizing the highest authority and the source of all life (Kuncheng Zhang, 2006). For example, the emperor is often referred to as “tian zi”, meaning “Son of Heaven,” signifying his supreme authority. However, the concept of “sky” in this context may not resonate with Western audiences in the same way, as they do not associate “sky” with supremacy or the foundational principle of life in the same manner. This is why the translator has opted to deverbilize the expression. Instead of maintaining the literal metaphor of “sky,” the translation summarizes the core idea by stating that food is the “paramount concern” of the people. This approach effectively conveys the intended meaning—emphasizing the importance of food for the well-being of the people—while avoiding potential confusion or misinterpretation that could arise from the metaphorical use of “sky.” The translator, therefore, prioritizes communicative clarity over literal fidelity, adapting the original metaphor to suit the target culture’s understanding.

Through these communicative transformations, the translator successfully navigates the cultural and linguistic differences between Chinese and English, delivering the intended message with clarity and humor. The translation maintains the spirit of the original text while adapting it to the communicative preferences of the target language, demonstrating the importance of cultural sensitivity in translation.

5. Conclusion

Hubei folk culture, deeply rooted in the everyday practices and lifestyles of the local people, is rich in distinctive Chinese characteristics. This cultural specificity presents challenges when translating Folk Culture-Specific Items (FCSIs), as the translator must address linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions to make the target text accessible and engaging for readers. Effective translation requires a thorough understanding of these dimensions to transform the original content while maintaining its meaning and relevance.

In particular, the linguistic dimension focuses on shifts at the lexical and syntactic levels, often involving techniques such as transliteration combined with explanation, or the addition of connecting words and phrases. At the cultural level, some FCSIs carry connotations that require interpretation, and amplification is commonly used to clarify these meanings for the target audience. The communicative dimension, meanwhile, offers greater flexibility in adapting the source text’s form, where semantic translation is often employed to convey the intended message while ensuring readability.

Although these translation techniques are categorized by dimension, some FCSIs may require a combination of approaches. The three-dimensional transformations—linguistic, cultural, and communicative—often occur simultaneously, meaning that the translator must take an integrated approach when analyzing and adapting the text. This comprehensive method requires an understanding of the source context, the purpose of the translation, and the linguistic habits of the target readers. By considering all these factors, the translator can produce a fluent translation that preserves the original Chinese features while ensuring clarity and accessibility for the target audience.

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Appendix (Source Text and Target Text)

Case	Source Text	Target Text
1	湖北的风俗是小孩满月要请酒，家里要接客，亲戚需赶情。凡来吃酒的宾客都会得到四个用颜料染红并煮熟的鸡蛋。	When the new-born is one month old, the family will hold a feast and invite guests to this celebration. <u>In the meantime</u> , relatives are supposed to <u>congratulate by gifting</u> . And all the guests will be treated with four boiled eggs colored in red.
2	制作前要将山坡上鲜嫩的社蒿采撷回家，洗净剁碎，揉尽苦水，焙干，再与野蒜、腊豆干、腊肉干等掺和糯米焖制做成社饭。	Firstly, fresh and tender <u>Shehao</u> , <u>a kind of Chinese sweet wormwood usually taken as medicine</u> , picked from the hills need to be gathered, washed, finely chopped, drained of bitterness, and dried. It is then mixed with wild garlic, dried bean curd, and cured meat and glutinous rice to concoct the savory shefan.
3	如送葬时，长孙需在棺上“坐棺”，长孙要披白头巾，着红袍，这在其他地方很少见。	During funeral procession, wearing a white headscarf and a red robe, the eldest grandson is required to sit on the coffin <u>which is an implication of blessing the kid successful in his career</u> —a practice rarely seen elsewhere.
4	行礼时，小孩先以子孙礼祭拜干亲的祖先，然后以父母礼向干爹干妈行礼。	During the ritual, the kid should first pray to ancestors of his second parents and then <u>kowtow</u> to his second parents <u>to show respect</u> .
5	如果某户人家喜添贵子，邻里乡亲就会立即前来祝贺：“恭喜你添了一个学生。”主人喜气洋洋地回应说：“添了一个讨米棍。”	When a household is blessed with a newborn boy, the neighbors will come to congratulate them, saying, “Congratulations on having a <u>son!</u> ” The host responds humorously, “ <u>We just add another mouth to feed.</u> ”
6	中国有句老话是“民以食为天”	China harbors the age-old adage, “ <u>Food is the people’s paramount concern.</u> ”