



An Empirical Study of Stein's Translation and Introduction of Kuchean Culture in Xinjiang

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Abstract

This study undertook an empirical study of Stein's translation and introduction of Chinese Kuchean culture. Stein was one of the earliest scholars to disseminate the Kuchean culture of Xinjiang to the world. In his numerous works, he rendered translations of Kuchean culture-specific items with cultural preservation, providing an effective medium for Western readers to understand the authentic Kuchean culture, and making significant contributions to the global dissemination of Xinjiang's Kuchean culture. This article employs Aixelá's theory of culture-specific items in translation to analyze the translation strategies related to Kuchean culture in Stein's works, thereby demonstrating how Stein employed cultural preservation strategies in translating and introducing the Kuchean culture of Xinjiang. A sample of 105 Kuchean culture-specific items chosen from Stein's works was analyzed. The result shows that 87 of them were translated and introduced by the method of cultural preservation, and only 18 of them were treated by the way of cultural substitution.

Keywords

Stein; Kuchean Culture; Translation; Cultural-specific Items; Cultural Preservation

1. Introduction

The earliest known record of the Kucha Kingdom (200 BC-1096 AD) appears in Ban Gu's *Han Shu·Xiyu Zhuan*:

"The capital of the Kucha Kingdom is located in Yancheng, 7,480 li away from Chang'an. It has 6,970 households, with a population of 81,317, and 21,760 soldiers. There is one each of the following positions: the Grand Commander-in-Chief, the Auxiliary Marquis, the An Guo Marquis, the Ji Hu Marquis, the Que Hu Commander, the Ji Che Shi Commander, the Left and Right Generals, the Left and Right Commanders, the Left and Right Cavalry Commanders, and the Left and Right Li Fu Commanders. There are two Qian Chang (a type of official position) for each of the four directions (east, west, north, and south), three Que Hu Qian (a type of official position), and four Yi Chang (a type of official position). It borders Jingjue to the south, Qiamo to the southeast, Qiamu to the southwest, Wusun to the north, and Gumo to the west. It is capable of casting and smelting, and has lead. It is 350 li east to the administrative office of the Protector, located in Wulei City."

The ancient Kucha Kingdom was centered around the present Kucha oasis, and at its peak, its territory included today's counties and cities of Luntai, Kucha, Shaya, Baicheng, Aksu, and Xinhe in Xinjiang. The Kucha area was the center of the ancient Kucha Kingdom, with a rich historical and cultural heritage, and was the birthplace of

Kuchean culture. From 1900 to 1916, the British explorer Aurel Stein conducted three expeditions to Kucha, Yanxing, and Turpan, and wrote books such as *Ancient Hotan*, *Serindia*, and *Innermost Asia*. The Kuchean culture is profound and extensive, blending various cultural elements from the East and West, which contributed to the prosperity of Kuchean culture in the past and its pivotal position in the history of world civilization today.

Stein's numerous English works on Kuchean culture have played a crucial role in the international dissemination of Kuchean culture in Xinjiang. This paper aims to examine the translation and introduction strategies for terms related to Kuchean culture in his works. Based on the translation theory of culturally specific items proposed by Spanish scholar Aixelá, this study investigates the translation and introduction strategies employed through data statistics.

2. Theory Introduction

The concept of culturally specific items was first introduced by British scholar Mona Baker. Subsequently, Spanish scholar Aixelá (1996, pp. 52-78) proposed a similar concept in his book *Cultural-specific Items in Translation*. He believes that culturally specific items refer to words or expressions in the target language that are difficult to realize and transform in the source language, carrying unique cultural functions and connotations. He posits three major categories of translation strategies for culturally specific items that translators can employ (Luo & Huang, 2025, pp. 28-34, 116; Ni & Wang, 2023, pp. 15-23; Yu & Wang, 2018, pp. 138-139, 144). The first category is cultural preservation strategies, encompassing transliteration, repetition, extratextual annotation, intratextual annotation, and linguistic (non-cultural) translation. The second category is cultural substitution strategies (Feng, 2025, pp. 82-84), including domestication, absolute generalization, synonym substitution, weakening translation, and limited generalization. The third category is cultural abandonment strategies, consisting of deletion, partial deletion, and original creation. In practical translation activities, authors or translators often adopt a combination of two or more translation methods to handle culturally specific terms.

3. Results and Discussion

This study adopted an empirical design. A total of 105 samples of translated terms related to Kuchean culture from the works on the translation and introduction of Kuchean culture by Stein. After statistical analysis, it was found that 87 of these terms adopted a cultural preservation strategy, while 18 adopted a cultural substitution strategy. Evidently, Stein's translation and introduction of Kuchean cultural terms leaned towards the use of cultural preservation strategies (accounting for 82.8%). Although the author's methods of translating and introducing Kuchean cultural terms were diverse, overall, there was a preference for transliteration (62 instances, accounting for 59%). This clearly indicates the author's enthusiasm for Kuchean culture and their eagerness to introduce it to Western readers in its original form.

Stein applied six translation methods to cultural retention strategies, a total of 87 instances. Specifically, there were 33 instances of transliteration, 32 instances of transliteration combined with repetition, 14 instances of linguistic (non-cultural) translation, 2 instances of transliteration combined with in-text annotation, 5 instances of transliteration combined with repetition and in-text annotation, and 1 instance of linguistic (non-cultural) translation combined with repetition. Meanwhile, the author employed four translation methods for cultural substitution strategies, a total of 18 instances. Specifically, there were 14 instances of domestication, 2 instances of domestication combined with transliteration, 1 instance of domestication combined with repetition, and 1 instance of domestication combined with transliteration and repetition.

3.1 Cultural Preservation Strategies

3.1.1 Transliteration method

Stein often adopted this approach for geographical cultural terms, with a total of 18 instances. This is similar to Hu Gengshen's communicative dimension principle for the translation and introduction of place names, ensuring that explorers like him at the time could accurately locate historical monuments or remains of Kuchean culture. For example, *Tumshuk* was used to translate “图木舒克”. In addition, there were 5 instances involving the names of ancient Western regions, 3 instances involving personal names, 1 instance involving the name of a dynasty, 1 instance involving the name of an official position, 1 instance involving the name of a unit of measurement, and 4

instances involving the names of ancient books.

There are three points worth noting. First, the author used capitalized English. For example, in the translation of mountain names, “天山” was translated as *TIEN-SHAN*; capitalized English conveys a sense of solemnity and awe. Stein appropriately translated the sacred and awe-inspiring sense of the Tianshan Mountains in Kuchean culture to the West, allowing Western readers to understand the importance of the Tianshan Mountains in Kuchean culture. Second, the author used diacritical marks. For example, in the translation of ancient city names, “苏巴什” was translated as *Su-bāshī*, “营盘” was translated as *Ying-p’an*, and “千佛洞” was translated as *Ch’ien-fo-tung*. The diacritical marks [-] and [’] accurately reflect the pauses in Chinese, allowing Western readers to accurately pronounce them and ask local guides, thereby enabling them to more quickly and effectively locate the ancient cities of *Su-bāshī*, *Ying-p’an*, or *Ch’ien-fo-tung* to explore Kuchean culture. Among them, the Thousand Buddha Caves, also known as the Kizil Caves, are important sites of Kucha Buddhist culture. The Thousand Buddha Caves group of grottoes, which was initially carved in the late 3rd century AD, is a comprehensive art of caves, murals, and sculptures, forming a unique Kucha style. From it, we can glimpse the development, dissemination, and evolution of ancient Buddhist art in China, which has special value for studying the social history of ancient Kucha, the history of Chinese Buddhism, the history of art, and art theory. In addition to religious content, the Thousand Buddha Caves also have many images representing farming, hunting, trade, music, dance, and ethnic customs, which are typical representatives of Buddhist art in ancient Kucha. Third, Stein used foreign language alphabets. For example, in the translation of towns, *Shule* (the former name of Kashgar) is translated as *Su-lè*, and Kashgar is translated as *Kāshgar*. The foreign letters “ê” and “ǎ” accurately reproduce the pronunciation of the Chinese characters “勒” and “喀”, thus enabling Western enthusiasts to more easily find the Kucha culture related to this ancient city.

3.1.2 Transliteration + repetition method

Stein adopted a method of transliteration combined with repeating the original text for the translation and introduction of names of ancient countries in the Western Regions (10 instances), ancient towns in the Western Regions (5 instances), personal names (3 instances), temple and building names (4 instances), mountain and river names (2 instances), official titles (2 instances), and frontier beacon signals (6 instances) related to Kucha culture. His main intention was to faithfully convey the original cultural connotations of Kucha culture to Western readers.

For example, in the translation and introduction of names of ancient countries in the Western Regions, he translated “Kucha” as “KUCHĀ 龜茲”, “Ch’iu-tzú 龜茲”, “Ch’ü-tzú 屈茲”, and “Ch’ü-chih 屈支”. The author used four different translated texts to retain as much as possible the Kuchean culture of different periods, hoping that Western readers would not miss any content related to Kuchean culture in different eras. Another example is about personal names, where he translated “Zheng Ji” as “Chêng Chi 鄭吉”. Stein repeated the original text “鄭吉” to ensure that Western readers would fully understand that Zheng Ji, not someone else, was the first Chinese governor of the Western Regions, as he was aware that homophones are common in Chinese. He did not want Western readers to mistake “Chêng Chi” for someone else, such as “Zheng Ji 郑及”. One more example is with frontier beacon signals, where he translated “Wei Hu” as “Wei-hu 威胡”. Stein first used transliteration, and then repeated the original Chinese characters “威胡”. Obviously, this was because the author also found it difficult to understand the original text, so he retained the original flavour of ancient frontier customs embodied by Kucha as a frontier fortress through direct translation.

3.1.3 Transliteration + in-text annotation method

In two instances, Stein adopted this method during the translation and introduction process, which not only rendered the authentic Kuchean culture but also accurately conveyed its content. This allows Western readers to fully appreciate the connotation of Kuchean culture. One instance involved the term “胡人”, which the author translated as “Hu, i.e., barbarian”. Here, transliteration was used to retain the ancient Chinese Central Country’s term for people from the Western Regions, while an in-text note accurately conveyed the connotation of “barbarian” in Chinese. More notably, during the Western Han Dynasty, the Kucha Kingdom was under the jurisdiction of the Xiongnu, only to become subordinate to the Han Dynasty during the Eastern Han Dynasty, and then once again fall under the jurisdiction of the Xiongnu during the Wang Mang period. Therefore, broadly speaking, the Kucha people also belong to the Hu people, but narrowly speaking, the Kucha people are of Indo-European ethnicity and do not belong to the Hu people. Another instance involved the term “Shaquan”, which the author translated as “Sha-ch’üan (the

sand spring)". Similarly, transliteration was used to retain the name of Shaquan in ancient Kucha, while an in-text note clarified the precise meaning of the spring water.

3.1.4 Transliteration + in-text annotation + repetition method

This method is used five times in the text, four times for mountain and river names, and once for a Buddhist station name. Taking "Ch'ih Ho (Red River)" as an example, the author translates it as "Ch'ih Ho (Red River)", first using transliteration to directly retain the Chinese pinyin, allowing Western readers to ask locals where Ch'ih Ho is through oral pronunciation. Then, an in-text annotation "Red River" is provided to enable Western readers to understand the significance of Ch'ih Ho, so that they can easily determine when they have found Ch'ih Ho when they see red river water during exploration. Finally, using traditional Chinese characters "赤河" directly disseminates Chinese writing culture and allows Western enthusiasts of Kuchean culture to appreciate the charm of Chinese. They can also directly use Chinese characters to ask locals about the ruins related to Ch'ih Ho. Ch'ih Ho is located in Kashgar (formerly known as Shule) in the southwest of the ancient Kucha kingdom, and is a tributary of the Tarim River, one of the important rivers for agricultural irrigation in the Kucha kingdom.

3.1.5 Language (non-cultural) translation method

This method is employed 14 times in the text, which well demonstrates the originality and readability of the Kuchean culture. Among them, there are 4 instances of translating mountain and river names, such as translating "Lop Nur" as "Lop desert". There are 3 instances of translating ancient Kucha country names, such as translating "Wusun country" as "Wu-sun nation". There are 3 instances of translating dynasty names, such as translating "Western Han dynasty" as "Former Han dynasty". There are 2 instances of translating book titles, such as translating "Qian Han Shu" as "Former Han Annals". There is 1 instance of translating tribe names, such as translating "Xiongnu" as "Hsiung-nu tribes". There is 1 instance of translating tree names in Buddhism, such as translating "Bodhi tree" as "Bodhi tree".

3.1.6 Linguistic (non-cultural) translation method + repetition method

The author only adopted the linguistic (non-cultural) translation method combined with repetition for "浑河", translating it as "Hun River 浑河". This may be because Western readers find it difficult to pronounce "Hun", which hinders them from asking locals about the river during their explorations. Therefore, the original Chinese character "浑河" is added for identification, facilitating their search for and exploration of the ruins of Kucha culture.

3.2 Cultural Substitution Strategies

Stein adopted four cultural substitution translation methods, including domestication, domestication combined with transliteration, repetition, or a combination of both, with domestication being the most frequently used method. The main reason why the author adopted the cultural substitution strategy was that these Kucha cultural terms contained special meanings that could not be reproduced in the English language and culture. If literal translation was used to retain the original culture, it would be difficult for Western readers to understand, thus losing the significance of translation.

3.2.1 Naturalization method

Stein domesticated and translated a total of 14 cultural terms, which, while enhancing the readability of his works, also resulted in the loss of the cultural connotations of the original text. Among them, there were 5 instances of geographical names. For instance, translating "Western Countries" for "西域各国" lost the relevant connotation of "exotic charm" in the original text. There were 5 instances of Buddhist-related terms. For example, translating "cave-temples" for "洞窟" lost the content of "the ascetic practices of Buddhists" implied in the original text. There were 3 instances of cultural relic names. For instance, translating "Chinese inscribed slips of wood" for "木简" lost the bamboo and wooden slip culture contained in the original text. Additionally, there was 1 instance of an official title. For example, translating "Protector General" for "都护" lost the meaning of "supervising and protecting all people within the jurisdiction" contained in the original text.

3.2.2 Transliteration + domestication method

The author translates "五铢钱" as "Wu-chu coin", which can be said to have completely abandoned the connotation

of Kucha culture. This may largely be intended to facilitate smooth reading for Western readers, but unfortunately, Western readers are unable to understand the Kucha culture behind this copper coin. The “五铢钱” refers to the round square-hole copper coins circulated from the early Western Han Dynasty to the early Tang Dynasty. It is a type of ancient Chinese copper currency, named after its weight of five zhù (approximately 3.33 grams) and the two seal characters “五铢” cast on it. Initially issued by the Han Dynasty government, the “五铢钱” was used as currency in the Western Regions (including Kucha). From the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty to the early Tang Dynasty, Kucha minted copper coins imitating the Han Dynasty’s “五铢钱”, known as “Kucha Five Zhù”. These coins, with both Kucha and Chinese characters cast on the back, became an important currency on the northern Silk Road. The minting of “Kucha Five Zhù” coins reflects the blending of Han culture and Kucha culture. Its shape and structure mimic the Han Dynasty’s “五铢钱”, but with Kucha characters on the back, it retains the characteristics of the Han currency system while incorporating local scripts, serving as a tangible example of multicultural exchange in the Western Regions.

3.2.3 Naturalization method + repetition method

The author adopted the domestication method combined with the repetition of Chinese characters to translate and introduce the concept of “館” as “inn”. “Inn” helps Western readers quickly understand the meaning of a guesthouse, while the repetition of the Chinese character “館” compensates for cultural gaps. Originally, “館” refers to a residence for receiving guests, and later came to signify luxurious residences and official offices, rather than the ordinary guesthouses referred to by “inn” in English culture.

3.2.4 Naturalization + transliteration + repetition method

The author adopted a method of domestication combined with transliteration to translate the term “signal post” Chih-chien (止姦) for the signal soldiers at the frontier fortress in the Western Regions. This type of military unit does not exist in English-speaking cultures, so the author first domesticated it, explaining that it was a “signal post” (a type of signal soldier), making it very easy for Western readers to understand. Then, transliteration was used to convey the connotation of the Chinese term. Finally, by repeating the original Chinese characters, a more direct cultural experience was provided, allowing Western readers to gain a deeper understanding of the connotation of Kuchean culture. In 77 BC (the fourth year of the Yuanfeng era of Emperor Zhaodi of the Han Dynasty), Kucha submitted to the Han Dynasty. In 60 BC (the second year of the Shenjue era), the Han Dynasty established the Western Regions Protectorate in the city of Wulei in the east of Kucha, making Kucha a frontier fortress of the Han Dynasty and thus rich in military cultural connotations.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that Stein primarily employed cultural preservation strategies to translate and introduce Kuchean culture, with the most frequently used methods being transliteration and in-text annotation, in order to introduce the authentic Kuchean culture to Western readers to the greatest extent.

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