

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND TRANSLATION STUDIES (IJELR)

A QUARTERLY, INDEXED, REFEREED AND PEER REVIEWED OPEN ACCESS INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

http://www.ijelr.in (Impact Factor: 5.9745) (ICI)



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 12. Issue 2. 2025 (April-June)



A Study of English Translation of Culture-loaded Words from the Perspective of Cultural Schema Theory — Taking Selected Modern Chinese Essays as an Example

LI Siyi¹, LI Lijun²

¹Postgraduate, Foreign Languages School, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China

Email: lisy4141@163.com

²Associate Professor, Foreign Languages School, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China

doi: 10.33329/ijelr.12.2.19



Article information

Article Received:11/03/2025 Article Accepted:19/04/2025 Published online:26/04/2025

Abstract

Culture-loaded words are words that carry rich cultural connotations in a specific culture. Due to the differences between Chinese and Western cultural backgrounds, people from different cultures often perceive such words differently, making them obstacles in cross-cultural communication and translation. Therefore, the study of culture-loaded words is essential. The cultural schema theory provides a feasible perspective for translating cultureloaded words: based on cultural schemata, translators could decode cultureloaded words in source language, then restructure and transform them to construct intelligible cultural schemata for target language readers. Prose works contain numerous culture-loaded words. This study focuses on Zhang Peiji's Selected Modern Chinese Essays, applying cultural schema theory to analyze translation methods for culture-loaded words in prose. The study finds that: when the cultural schemata of source-language and targetlanguage readers correspond, translators often use literal translation and idiomatic translation methods to activate the cultural schemata of the target language readers; cultural schemata conflicts are mostly manifested in religious culture-loaded words, where paraphrase method of free translation is usually used to explain their special cultural connotations; when cultural schemata default, translators either use free translation or retain the original cultural schemata and adopt the transliteration method to transplant the unique cultural schemata into the target language, thus maintaining Chinese cultural characteristics.

Keywords: culture schema, culture-loaded words, *Selected Modern Chinese Essay*, *Zhang Peiji*.

1 Introduction

Zhang Peiji's *Selected Modern Chinese Essays* brings together a large number of profound and representative prose works written by outstanding Chinese writers since the May Fourth Movement. This book not only serves as a valuable reference for Chinese scholars studying literary translation, but also introduces many outstanding prose works to the world, helping Westerners understand and explore the intellectual evolution of Chinese thinkers since the May Fourth Movement.

The literary works during the May Fourth period are characterized by vernacular Chinese writing and extensively employed realist writing methods. These works emphasize individual liberation, propelling the modernization of Chinese literature. Representative writers such as Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, Guo Moruo, Hu Shi, Zhu Ziqing, and Yu Dafu, through their classic works, collectively established milestones in this literary reform movement. The May Fourth prose mainly consists of two major series, namely social prose and life prose (Ding, 2003).

The culture-loaded words in literary works reflect the social and cultural patterns that a nation has gradually accumulated over a long historical process and that are different from those of other nations (Liao, 2000). This study selects works from the first and second volumes of *Selected Modern Chinese Essays*, primarily written in the 1920s and 1930s. It identifies and categorizes culture-loaded words in these proses and analyzes their translations based on cultural schema theory. This study aims to offer practical translation strategies for dealing with culturally specific expressions, better guiding translation activities. Meanwhile, it holds significance for foreign readers in comprehending both excellent literary works and sociocultural situation during early 20th-century China.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Definition of Cultural Schema

British psychologist Bartlett (1932) first proposed schema theory, suggesting that schema is "an active organization of past reactions, or of past experiences, which must always be supposed to be operating in the individual's life". He proposed that people have schemata, or unconscious mental structures, that represent an individual's generic knowledge about the world. Cultural schema is a branch of schema theory, and scholars at home and abroad have different interpretations of the meaning of cultural schema. D'Andrade (1984) introduced the concept of cultural schema, viewing it as "a cognitive schema that is inter-subjectively shared by a social group". DiMaggio (1997) believed that cultural schema is themed and widely shared schema and is the smallest units for analyzing culture. Yule (2000) points out that cultural schemata are knowledge structures based on "the context of our basic experiences". Sharifian (2001) defines cultural schemata as a subclass of cognitive schemata that are culturally constructed and are abstracted from the collective cognition associated with a cultural group. Pan Weimin (2001) divided schema into three major categories: content schema, formal schema and grammatical schema, proposing that cultural schema includes cultural psychological schema and cultural behavioral schema. Zhou Dubao (2002) considered schema to be hypertextual cultural knowledge, encompassing different traditions, customs, etc. Liu Mingdong (2003) proposed that cultural schema is structural block of cultural knowledge in the human brain, meaning that people have already formed knowledge structures about culture in their minds based on previous experiences.

Although different scholars have varying understandings of the concept of cultural schema, there exists common ground. Cultural schema could be understood as a cognitive structure formed by individuals or groups concerning cultural information, based on their cultural background and past experiences. Cultural schema is dynamic since it includes not only the cognitive representations of cultural elements (such as traditions, customs, beliefs), but also the understanding of the relationships among these elements. Cultural schema enables individuals to quickly adapt to and respond to new situations in the cultural environment. Meanwhile, it is also the basis for cross-cultural communication and understanding.

2.2 Translatability of Cultural Schema

Culture schemata in the human mind, which are expressible through language and understandable in communicative activities, are translatable. Liu Mingdong (2003) pointed out that the translatability of cultural schema refers to the comprehensibility of cultural schema in the source language, the expression of translators, and the acceptance of target language readers. He proposed that the reasons for its translatability are reflected in three aspects. First, the wide similarity of culture lays a solid foundation for the translatability of cultural schema. Second, the social acquisition nature of culture provides a fundamental guarantee of the translatability of cultural schema. Third, cultural tolerance and integration are the strong backing for the translatability of cultural schema.

Due to the uniqueness of culture, the translation of the cultural schema cannot be done in the same way. Cultural schema translatability can be achieved by three methods: A-A correspondence, A-B correspondence and A-Zero correspondence. The first two methods make use of the existing cultural schema of the target language and belong to the category of immediate acceptance by the target language readers, while the last method enriches and develops the cultural schema of the target language and belongs to the category of long-term acceptance by the target language readers (Liu, 2003).

2.3 Classification of Cultural Schema Translation

The translation of culture elements is a process of converting the cultural schema of the source language with the cultural schema of the target language. According to the difference between the source language cultural schema and the target language cultural schema, there are three types in the translation and conversion of cultural schema: cultural schema correspondence, cultural schema conflict, and cultural schema default.

Cultural schema correspondence means that the cultural schemata of the source language and the target language are basically equivalent, and the cultural schemata of the target language can correctly and fully express the cultural information carried by the cultural schemata of the relevant source language. Cultural schema conflict means that the source language and the target language have different cultural schemata. Cultural schema default means that the relevant cultural schema in the cognitive context of the author of the source language does not exist or is incomplete in the cognitive context of the reader of the target language (Yue, 2007).

The translation of literary works is not only a simple translation and conversion of language, but more importantly, the translation and conversion of cultural schema. When translators translate these cultural schemata, they should adopt appropriate translation strategies and translation methods to translate them to the readers of the translated language, so that more people can understand the cultural connotations. In next part, the transformation of cultural schemata reflected in literary translation will be further analyzed.

3 Analysis of English Translation of Culture-loaded words in Selected Modern Chinese Essays

3.1 Culture-loaded words in Selected Modern Chinese Essays

In Selected Modern Chinese Essays, there are a large number of culture-loaded words that reflect the characteristics of the times. Nida (1945) stated that "translation-problems, which are essentially problems of equivalence, may be conveniently treated under ecology, material culture, social culture, religious culture, and linguistic culture". Based on Nida's view, this paper classifies the culture-loaded words in selected texts into five categories. They are ecological culture-loaded words, material culture-loaded words, social culture-loaded words, religious culture-loaded words and linguistic culture-loaded words.

Ecological culture-loaded words refer to words that carry biological attributes and natural elements. These terms reflect people's cognition and experiential knowledge of the natural environment, such as knowledge about flora and fauna, geographical environments and climate changes. In prose, certain words carry distinct regional cultural connotations unique to China, such as "扬子江", "黄河", "北海", "川江", "雷峰塔", "直隶" and so on.

Material culture-loaded words relate to the material conditions and achievements of a given culture, including technology, tools, food, clothing, etc. These words reflect the accumulated knowledge and experiential wisdom of material culture of people throughout historical processes and help people construct and understand the cultural cognitive framework pertaining to the material world. Material culture-loaded words appearing in the text include "线装书", "马褂", "白干", "麻将", "龙井茶", "七巧板", "黑票", etc.

Social culture-loaded words relate to social structures, social relations, social norms, and social phenomena. Such schemata are usually about social systems, family structures, educational systems, kinship titles, folk cultures, etc., reflecting customs and cultures in different societies. For example, "小丫头", "宫女", "宋姨太太", "行三", "三姑娘", "茶房", "脚夫", "掌柜的", "老陈" are all social culturally loaded words that appear in these prose.

Religious culture-loaded words contain many unique religious elements that may be more difficult for non-believers to understand. They may relate to specific religious terms, rituals, or objects of belief. Religious culture-loaded words that appear in selected texts are relatively few, such as "法号", "圆通大师", "仙界", "灵宫", "功德罪孽", "空玄境界", "劫", etc.

Linguistic culture-loaded words are related to language use, language styles and language habits. They are the manifestations of language communication and language expression in cultural schemata, including idioms, proverbs, allusions and so on. For example, "一泻千里", "人心不古", "故国不堪回首", "树倒猢狲散" and so on.

Cultural-loaded words will inevitably lead to the problem of generation gap or distance between the target language and the source language in translation (Newmark, 1932). Therefore, the translator's attention to those culturally loaded words which are rich in specific cultural characteristics, and the construction of appropriate schema for the readers of the translated language are not only a focus of successful translation activities, but also an important means of realizing intercultural communication.

3.2 Translation of Culture-loaded Words based on the Cultural Schema

3.2.1 Cultural Schemata Correspondence

Although cultural contexts may differ, people share a cognitive common ground: different cultural communities may develop similar or even identical cognitive framework toward specific cultural elements. In literary translation, cultural schemata correspondence is a common and relatively easy situation to deal with. Translators can find elements in the target language that correspond to the cultural schemata in the source language, so that accurately convey the meanings and cultural information contained in the source language with the help of these cultural schemata in the target language. In the following examples, ST stands for source text, TT for target text.

Example 1:

ST: 后来他在钱铺里作伙计。

TT: Later Mr. Cha Buduo served as an shop assistant at a money shop.

In this sentence, "钱铺" is a material culture-loaded word. In Chinese history, "钱铺" is a shop for exchanging money, which was closely related to financial activities in ancient China. In different historical periods, the function and importance of this shop varied. For example, in the early Qing Dynasty, "钱铺" were not only a place for exchanging currencies, but also involved in lending money and other businesses. The Western money shops originated from the need for currency exchange. Due to the diverse monetary systems across city-states, currency conversion became essential for trade circulation, giving rise to money changers. They conducted exchange services on street benches thus earning them the name "bankers" (from Italian banchieri), while their currency exchange institutions vividly called "banks" (derived from banca, meaning "bench" in Italian). The schema of "钱铺" in Chinese and Western cultures is relatively compatible, so a literal translation method is used, translating it as "money shop". It directly conveys the literal meanings of the two Chinese characters and is understandable to English-speaking readers. Moreover, "伙计" here denotes a clerk or an employee. The collocation between "assistant" and "money shop" facilitates target-language readers in constructing a similar cultural schema to that of source-language readers.

Example 2:

ST: 我在那时候当然是"丑小鸭", 自己也是知道的, 但是终不以此而减灭我的热情。

TT: Of course I knew then I was nothing but an "Ugly Duckling", but that didn't damp down my passion.

"毋小鸭" is a linguistic culture-loaded word that originates from Andersen's famous fairy tale *The Ugly Duckling*. The story tells of a duckling that is mocked for being different but eventually grows into a beautiful swan. "毋小鸭" is often used as a metaphor for those who are overlooked or mocked during their growth due to their appearance, abilities or other characteristics, but ultimately reveal their true value or inherent beauty. This term, being a loanword, carries themes of personal growth, self-discovery, and growth in adversity. In the text, it expresses the self-awareness of the "I" character that concubine Song was out of his league. This word corresponds to cultural schema in both Chinese and Western cultures so that a literal translation allows English-speaking readers to immediately associate it with Andersen's fairy tale, making it very easy to understand.

Example 3:

ST: 等到大舜皇帝一来,那位背时的先生又拖着尾巴跑了。

TT: As soon as the autocrat came on the scene, the poor lonely heart fled with the tail between his legs.

"拖着尾巴跑了" is a Chinese idiom and a linguistic culture-loaded word. In traditional Chinese culture, it is often used to describe someone who slinks away after a failure or embarrassment, carrying a negative and sarcastic connotation. In Western culture, a similar expression is "to flee with one's tail between one's legs", which means to run away quickly, also with implications of avoidance and shame. Both Chinese and Western cultures have expressions that satirize the behavior of the defeated. The schema is the same, and thus the expression can be borrowed from the target language so that the target language reader can easily understand the meaning to be conveyed in the text.

Example 4:

ST: "阿三那小东西,也不是好货,将来总要流落到拱辰桥去做婊子的。"

TT: "That Goddam Ah San! She's no good either. She's sure to end up a whore some day in Gong-Chen-Qiao."

In this sentence, there are swear words a such as "小东西", "不是好货" and "婊子". "小东西" in Chinese has two meanings: it can be an affectionate term of endearment, usually used to express affection and fondness for children or small animals, or a derogatory term expressing contempt or belittlement towards someone, with the specific emotional connotation depending on the context. In Zhou Zuoren's First Love, when concubine Song expresses dissatisfaction and contempt towards Ah San, "小东西" clearly carries a connotation of contempt and belittlement. Zhang Peiji uses a calque, translating it as "That Goddam Ah San." "Goddam" is a swear word that many people find offensive, employed to express intense anger or irritation. This translation effectively conveys the original's the tone of cursing. "婊子" means a prostitute — a woman who has sex with people for money, and later it was used to insult women. Here, the intended meaning is the first one. In English, this impolite term is also commonly used, "whore" is an insulting word for a prostitute, and the cultural schema corresponds, allowing for a literal translation.

3.2.2 Cultural Schemata Conflict

Since the cultural schemata of the target language readers may not align completely or even conflict with the source language readers, when target language readers attempt to understand the source language text through the culture of their own nations, they may misunderstand the original meaning. In such cases, translators should first decode the source language text, accurately understand the cultural connotations of the source language text, and reconstruct the cultural schemata in order to better convey cultural information.

Example 5:

ST: 艰难的国运与雄健的国民

TT: National Crisis vs. Heroic Nation

"国运" is a culture-loaded word with metaphysical connotations. In ancient Chinese Yi Jing philosophy, scholars of divination described the cyclical movement and transformation of things as their fate or destiny, while a nation's fate or developmental trend was termed "国运". In this essay, "国 运" represents the social reality of China in the 1920s, when warlords were at war and imperialism invaded the country. If "国运" is translated as "fortune", "destiny" or "bad luck", the meaning the author wants to convey will be missing, so the cultural schema of Chinese and foreign readers will be in conflict. The translator translated "艰难的国运" as "national crisis", which reconstruct the source text to help target readers establish corresponding schemata and better express the characteristics of the era of national peril. Moreover, Chinese and foreign readers have conflicting cultural schema about the value of the individual. Western heroic narratives typically emphasize individualism — solitary heroes saving others through personal courage and wisdom. In contrast, Chinese tradition highlights the inseparability of individual and collective destiny, encapsulated in the ethos that "the rise and fall of the nation rests with every one of its citizens". The translation "heroic nation" strategically shifts from "people" to "nation", embodying a collectivist heroic worldview. This term not only expresses the strong will of the nation, but also calls on the people to be unafraid of sacrifice and to dare to fight, emphasizing that every individual is capable of standing up heroically at critical moments.

Example 6:

ST: **于是大家**给它取个死后的法号,叫他做圆通大师。

TT: So they called him a virtuous man and honored him with the posthumous reverent title Master of Easy-Going.

"法号" is a religious culture-loaded words. Chinese religious culture is deeply influenced by Buddhism and Taoism, whereas people in Western countries generally profess Christianity and Islam, and have limited knowledge of Buddhism. In Chinese culture, "法号" typically refers to the name given to a Buddhist when they take vows or a posthumous title added after their death, carrying profound religious significance and cultural connotations. However, in the Western Christian tradition, the "baptismal name" or "godparent's name" chosen by a godparent is not a posthumous title nor does it possess the specific ritual significance of a "法号" or serve to distinguish between secular and religious identities. If this translation is directly quoted from English, it may cause the target language readers to fail to understand and form cultural schema conflict. Therefore, the method of free translation is adopted, translating "法号" as "posthumous reverent title" to enable Western readers to understand it as an honorary title bestowed posthumously.

In literary translation, how to deal with the conflict between cultural schema and avoid misunderstanding among the translated readers presents a challenge for translators. When Chinese and Westerners cultural schemata conflict, translators could adopt the method of free translation in order to convey the original meaning more accurately.

3.2.3 Cultural Schemata Default

When translating culture-loaded words, it is most common for cultural images from the source language to be absent in the target language. Translators should adopt appropriate translation strategies and methods to construct comprehensible schemata for target language readers, to compensate for the missing cultural information as much as possible, thereby effectively conveying the original meaning.

There are many proper nouns such as personal names and place names in prose. For these culture-loaded words, the transliteration method can be adopted to directly translate them into the target language in Chinese pinyin. For example, "三姑娘 San-Gu-Niang", "阮升 Ruan Sheng", "李家沱 Li Jia Tuo", "柏滨 Bai Bin", "雷峰塔 Leifeng Pagoda" etc.

Example 7:

ST: 我们屋后有半亩隙地。

TT: Behind our house there lay half a mou of vacant land.

In Chinese culture, "亩" is a unit of land area originating from the well-field system during the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties. According to *Gu Liang Zhuan*, it is recorded that "古者三百步为里·名曰井田", and "井田者,九百亩·公田居一". "亩" was a fundamental unit for land measurement and farmland planning, closely tied to the economic and social organization of traditional Chinese agricultural society. However, in Western culture, people do not have a corresponding schema for "亩" and the land measurement unit they use, "acre", is not equivalent to it. Here, Zhang Peiji adopts the method of transliteration, preserving the cultural characteristics of the source language, which may also play a role in introducing Chinese culture to foreign readers.

The four-character phrases in Chinese are also unique linguistic culture-loaded words. They have a neat structure and beautiful rhythm and are often used in literary works, possessing a profound cultural heritage. In translation, translators often adopt a method of free translation, using paraphrase or idiomatic translation to achieve schema construction between readers of the target language and the source language. For example, "车水马龙" is translated as "be busy with traffic and throngs of people";

"灯红酒绿" is translated as "feasting and revelry"; "人心不古" is translated as "degeneration of public morality"

Example 8:

ST:真正的朋友,恐怕要算"总角之交"或"竹马之交"了。

TT: Real friendship between two persons originates perhaps from the time of life when they were children playing innocently together.

In this sentence, "总角" refers to the hairstyle of ancient boys and girls before they reached the age of wearing caps or pins, where their hair was combed into two bunches on top of their heads, resembling two horns, and later generations used it to refer to childhood. "竹马" refers to a children's toy, typically a pole with a model of a horse's head at one end and sometimes wheels at the other, allowing the child to straddle it and pretend to ride a horse. Both "总角之交" and "竹马之交" refer to close friends since childhood. The translator adopts the method of paraphrase, translating them into "the time of life when they were children playing innocently together", which clearly and concisely expresses the pure friendship of children who have played together since childhood. Although "总角" and "竹马" cannot find completely equivalent schema due to cultural differences, after paraphrase, readers of the target language can understand and appreciate the prose just like readers of the source language.

Example 9:

ST: 低声吟着帘卷西风, 人比黄花瘦之句, 这个小小的灵宫, 是弥漫了怅惘的情绪。

TT: My heart was filled with melancholy when I recited in a low voice the following lines of an ancient Chinese poet:

When the west wind furls up the curtain,

I'm more frail than the yellow chrysanthemum.

"帘卷西风·人比黄花瘦" is a typical culturally loaded expression in Chinese culture, appearing in the poem *Tipsy in the Shade of Flowers* by the Song Dynasty female poet Li Qingzhao. Here, the phrase "the following lines of an ancient Chinese poet" is added to inform readers that this is a poem. The translation of the verse itself preserves the original's artistic conception and emotional tone. By using "frail" to correspond to "瘦", it conveys the poetess's emotionally fragile state due to longing. "Yellow chrysanthemum" retains the cultural symbolic meaning of "黄花".

"灵宫" has multiple meanings in Chinese culture, often referring to places related to religion and ritual sacrifices, such as temples or palaces dedicated to deities. It is closely associated with ancient Chinese religious beliefs and sacrificial culture, often linked with mystery, sanctity, and supernatural forces. "灵宫" may also refer to imperial tombs, the abode of heavenly deities or immortals, a euphemistic term for a residence, and the protective deity of Taoism in Nuo culture. Based on a thorough understanding of the original text, translator opted for a liberal translation method, expressing the "灵宫" in the original text with "heart", thereby capturing its emotional and spiritual significance — the inner realm of feelings and a sanctuary for soul.

Example 10:

ST: "十字比千字只多一小撇,不是差不多吗?"

TT: "The character ∓ differs form + in merely having one additional short stroke. Aren't they about the same?"

4 Conclusion

In the era of globalization, cross-cultural communication among countries has become increasingly frequent, and the translation and introduction of literary works is also an important means of cultural exchange. This article discusses the English translation methods of culturally loaded words in Zhang Peiji's *Selected Modern Chinese Essays* from the perspective of cultural schema theory.

When cultural schemata correspond, translators need to fully activate the existing cultural schemata of the target language readers and usually adopt literal translation and idiomatic translation methods for culturally loaded words. When cultural schemata conflict, translators need to adjust their translations to enable target language readers to correctly understand the viewpoints and cultures intended to be conveyed in the source text, usually by using paraphrase in free translation to interpret unique cultural schemata. Cultural schema conflicts are often manifested in religious culture-loaded words. When cultural schemata are absent, translators need to help readers reconstruct new schemata, which can be done through transliteration, free translation, or retaining the original cultural schema while transplanting the unique cultural schema into the target language.

Culture-loaded words are not only carriers of language but also carriers of culture. Cultural schema theory provides theoretical support for the study of English translation of these words. Translators should fully consider cross-cultural differences and adopt appropriate translation strategies or methods to accurately construct readers' cultural schemata, thereby facilitating effective cultural exchange. Translation research should continue to deeply explore the translation of cultural factors to facilitate dialogue and understanding between different cultures, and to enable the world to better recognize and appreciate the unique charm and value of Chinese culture.

Reference

Bartlett, F. C. (1932). *Remembering: A study in experi-mental and social psychology*. Cambridge University Press.

D'Andrade, R. G. (1984). Cultural meaning systems. In R. A. Shweder & R. A. Le Vine (Eds.), *Culture theory: Essays on mind, self, and emotion.* (pp.194-236).

Dimaggio, P. (1997). Culture and cognition. Annual Review of Sociology, 23(1): 263-287.

Newmark, P. (1932). A textbook of translation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nida, E. (1945). Linguistics and ethnology in translation problems. Word I, (2):194-196.

Sharifian, F. (2001). Association-Interpretation: A research technique in cultural and cognitive linguistics. *Applied Language and Literacy Research*, 2(1): 1-15.

Yule, G. (2000). Pragmatics. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

丁晓原. (2003). 论"五四"人生派散文. 文学评论, (01),53-59.

刘明东. (2003). 文化图式的可译性及其实现手段. 中国翻译, 24(02): 30-33.

廖七一. (2000). 当代西方翻译理论探索. 南京: 译林出版社.

潘卫民. (2001). 翻译教学中的文化期待图式. 五邑大学学报(社会科学版), (04): 70-73.

岳中生. (2007). 文化图式缺省和冲突与文化翻译. 河南科技大学学报(社会科学版), (04): 65-67.

张培基. (2007). 英译中国现代散文选. 上海: 上海外语教育出版社.

周笃宝. (2002). 图式理论对理解翻译的解释力. *南华大学学报(社会科学版*), (04), 86-89.