

Research on the Domestication and Foreignization Strategies in the Translation of the Idioms in Yang's Version of *Dream of the Red Chamber*

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Abstract: *Dream of the Red Chamber* is a gem of Chinese classical literature, and its English translation plays a significant role in helping Western readers understand Chinese culture. This paper studies the domestication and foreignization strategies used in the translation of idioms in Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie's version of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The study finds that for idioms with a clear equivalent expression in the target language, the translation tends to use the domestication strategy, rendering the idioms into those with similar meanings and expressions in the target language, allowing readers to quickly understand and resonate with them. However, for idioms with unique cultural backgrounds in the source language, the translation opts for the foreignization strategy, using literal translation to preserve the features of the source language, thus enabling readers to experience the cultural flavor of the original text. In idiom translation, translators should flexibly choose the domestication or foreignization strategy based on whether an equivalent expression exists in the target language. For idioms with clear equivalents, domestication helps readers understand quickly; while for idioms with unique cultural backgrounds, foreignization retains the cultural features of the source language. This study not only helps readers understand the impact of different translation strategies on conveying the cultural connotations of the original text but also provides useful insights for future translation theory and practice.

Keywords: Yang's Version of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Idiom Translation, Domestication and Foreignization Strategies.

1. Introduction

Dream of the Red Chamber, as one of the Four Great Classical Novels of China, is not only a literary treasure but also a carrier of cultural heritage. The language style of this monumental work is rich, and its meaning is profound, especially in the use of idioms, which reflect the social landscape of the Qing Dynasty and contain deep cultural connotations of the era. As Bacon (2000) once said, "Idioms are a mirror of the nation." Therefore, the translation and study of idioms have high academic value and practical significance. Among the numerous English translations of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the version by Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie (hereafter referred to as Yang's version) is considered one of the most influential and representative. Yang's translation is elegant and effectively preserves the cultural and linguistic features of the original work, with many scholars having studied it. Research on Yang's translation is extensive, particularly in such areas as the translation of dish names, nicknames, and classifiers, with some research focusing on idiom translation. How to accurately convey the idioms and their cultural connotations in the original text through domestication and foreignization strategies is a key focus in current research. As two common strategies in translation theory, domestication and foreignization have different cultural orientations. Whether the idiom translation strategy in Yang's version follows these strategies, and how it affects the cultural transmission and language comprehensibility, directly influences readers' understanding and acceptance of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Therefore, studying the domestication and foreignization strategies in idiom translation in Yang's version plays an important role in improving translation quality and promoting cultural exchange.

This paper analyzes the idioms in Yang's translation, explores their application of domestication and foreignization strategies, and examines their impact on cultural transmission. It reveals how Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie, by using domestication and foreignization, retain the linguistic charm of the original work while allowing English-speaking readers to understand and appreciate the essence of ancient Chinese culture. The study shows that when facing idioms with strong cultural backgrounds, Yang's translation often adopts the foreignization strategy, aiming to convey the unique flavor of the source language. In contrast, for some more straightforward idioms with clear equivalent expressions in the target language, the domestication strategy is employed to make it easier for target-language readers to accept and understand. By analyzing the idiom translation in Yang's version, this research not only provides new perspectives on domestication and foreignization strategies in translation theory but also offers insights into the choice of idiom translation strategies for other classical novels.

2. Literature Review

The origins of domestication and foreignization can be traced back to an article presented by Schleiermacher (1813), titled "On Different Methods of Translation." Based on this, Venuti (1986) introduces the two terms "domestication" and "foreignization" in the field of translation. He defines domestication as adhering to the dominant values of the target language and culture, aligning with local laws, publishing trends, and political needs. Later, he defines foreignization as deviating from mainstream values and maintaining the cultural and linguistic differences of the original text.

Theoretically, domestication refers to a translation strategy centered on the target language culture. The domestication strategy insists on "reproducing the information of the

original text by using the closest and most natural equivalent language” (Nida, 1993: 127-131). This strategy uses the linguistic norms and expressions accepted in the target language culture, making the translation easier for the target language readers to understand and more suited for their reading preferences. The appropriate use of the domestication strategy can make the translation vivid, concise, and accurate, facilitating the understanding, acceptance, and use of the text by target language readers (Tan Xiaoli, 2004: 133-135).

Previous research on idiom translation has examined various cultural differences, backgrounds, and perspectives, but there remains some controversy regarding the choice of domestication and foreignization strategies. Qiu & Qiu (2019), based on Venuti’s theory of foreignization and domestication, analyzes the application of foreignization and domestication methods in the translation of English idioms, discussing the extreme cases of excessive domestication and excessive foreignization when these methods are improperly used. Huang (2009) argues that on the basis of domestication and foreignization, translators can use multiple methods to translate English-Chinese idioms, and flexible application of foreignization and domestication translation theories and techniques is necessary to achieve accurate and appropriate translation.

Wei (2022) studied the distinctive cultural nicknames in Yang’s and Huo’s translations of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Wang (2017) conducted a comparative study of the tea-drinking sections in the English translations of *Dream of the Red Chamber* by Yang, Hawkes, and Minford, arguing that translation methods should be applied flexibly, with no fixed formula. Li (2021) examined the Chinese back-translation of “Liu Xu Ci” in Hawke’s and Yang’s translations, highlighting the differences in their translations due to differences in source texts and analyzing the different interpretations of such terms as “Ge Nian Qi” and “Li Ren” by different translators, with a focus on comparing the significantly different representations of the poems of Daiyu and Baochai in the two translations and analyzing their causes. Wang & Yang (2014) argued that the English translation of *Dream of the Red Chamber* has indirectly promoted the overseas spread of traditional Chinese medicine culture. They selected relevant examples from the English translations by Yang, as well as by Hawkes, to analyze and interpret how the translators interpret Chinese medicine culture in the target language.

While the previous studies on Yang’s translation of *Dream of the Red Chamber* have focused on such aspects as dish names, nicknames, classifiers, and Chinese medicine culture, there has been a lack of research on the translation of the idioms in Yang’s version.

2.1. Application of the Domestication Strategy

In Yang’s translation of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the domestication strategy is mainly used to translate the idioms with clear equivalent expressions in the target language, adapting them to similar idiomatic expressions in English to help readers understand quickly and resonate with the text. A number of idiomatic expressions in *Dream of the Red Chamber* are translated by using the domestication strategy in Yang’s translation.

Example 1:

Original version: 叹人间，美中不足今方信。纵然是齐眉举案，到底是意难平。

Translation version: I sigh, no man’s happiness is complete. Even a pair thought well-matched may find

disappointment.

This excerpt is from Chapter 5 of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, expressing Jia Baoyu’s lingering feelings for Lin Daiyu after marriage, while Xue Baochai only has the empty title of “a perfect match,” living a lonely life. “齐眉举案” (literally “raising the tray to the eyebrow”) originates from the *Book of Later Han* by Fan Ye, originally referring to holding a tray at eyebrow level as a sign of respect. Later, it comes to symbolize mutual respect between a married couple. In this case, “举案齐眉” has a clear equivalent expression in English, so Yang used the domestication strategy to translate “齐眉举案，到底是意难平” as “even a pair thought well-matched may find disappointment”. If an alienation strategy were used and a literal translation were attempted, it would be too obscure and abstract, and the target language readers would likely find it difficult to understand the true meaning, possibly causing confusion. The use of the domestication strategy helps avoid this problem, making the translation clearer and easier to comprehend.

Example 2:

Original version: 宝钗笑道：“原来这叫作《负荆请罪》！你们通今博古，才知道‘负荆请罪’，我不知道什么是‘负荆请罪’！”

Translation version: Bao Chai retorted, “You two are the ones well versed in ancient and modern literature, so of course you know all about ‘abject apologies’- that’s something quite beyond me.”

This line is a joke made by Baochai while teasing Baoyu and Daiyu. “负荆请罪” comes from *Records of the Grand Historian: The Biographies of Lian Po and Lin Xiangru*. It refers to the story of Lian Po carrying a bundle of thorny wood to apologize to Lin Xiangru for his mistakes, later becoming a metaphor for offering a sincere apology and accepting punishment. In this case, Yang’s translation uses the domestication strategy, translating “负荆请罪” as the clearly equivalent expression “abject apology,” rather than a literal translation like “carrying the thorny wood.” If it were translated literally, the target readers would be confused and would not understand the phrase “carrying the thorny wood,” which would cause reading difficulties.

Example 3:

Original version: 鲍二家的听了这句，顶梁骨走了真魂，忙飞进报与尤二姐。尤二姐虽也一惊，但已来了，只得行礼相见。

Translation version: Frightened out of her wits, Bao Er’s wife flew in to report this. Second Sister You, too, was taken aback; but since Xifeng had come she had no choice but to receive her with befitting respect.

This sentence shows how Bao Er’s wife was frightened after hearing that Wang Xifeng came to find You Erjie, described as “顶梁骨走了真魂,” which means someone being extremely frightened. In this case, Yang uses the domestication strategy, translating this expression into “frightened out of her wits.” In Western cultures, there is no equivalent for “顶梁骨” (the main pillar) and “真魂” (true soul) to describe a person being frightened. A literal translation would be unclear to target readers, causing confusion and hindering comprehension. By using “frightened out of her wits”, Yang’s translation adapts the expression into an equivalent English idiom, making it easier for readers to understand.

2.2. Application of the Foreignization Strategy

In Yang's translation of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the foreignization strategy is primarily used to preserve the cultural features of the source language, allowing readers to experience the original cultural flavor. Some idioms in *Dream of the Red Chamber* in Yang's translation are rendered using the foreignization strategy.

Example 4:

Original version: 那刘姥姥先听见告艰苦, 只当是没有, 心里便突突的; 后来听见给她二十两, 喜得又浑身发痒起来, 说道: “我也是知道艰难的。但俗语说的, 瘦死的骆驼比马大, 凭他怎样, 你老拔根汗毛, 比我们的腰还粗呢!”

Translation version: Talks of difficulties had dashed all Granny Liu's hopes and see her heart palpitating. The problems of twenty taels put her in a flutter of jury, “ah,” she cried, “I know what difficulties are.” But ‘A starved camel is bigger than a horse’, no matter how ‘[A hair from is your body is thicker than our waist.’

In this example, the idiom “瘦死的骆驼比马大” (literally “A starved camel is bigger than a horse”) is used to describe a wealthy family, even though it has fallen from its former prosperity, still remaining more affluent compared to a commoner like Granny Liu. This phrase conveys that despite Jia Family's decline, it is still far wealthier than Granny Liu's poor background. Yang uses **foreignization** by translating “瘦死的骆驼比马大” as “A starved camel is bigger than a horse,” preserving the original metaphor and cultural context, which helps target readers understand the Chinese cultural connotation of this saying. By using the foreignized idiom, Yang enriches the target language, introducing readers to a distinct cultural reference, and giving them an opportunity to explore the cultural significance of the metaphor in the Chinese context.

Example 5:

Original version: 只因薛蟠天性是“得陇望蜀”的。

Translation version:

Xue Pan was a living example of the saying “to cover the land of Shu after getting the region of Long.”

The idiom “得陇望蜀” originates from *Records of Eastern Han: The Biography of Wei Xiao*, which refers to someone who, after gaining the land of Long, still wants to conquer Shu, implying that people who are never satisfied with what they have will always desire more. In this context, it describes Xue Pan, who, after marrying Jin Gui, still flirts with Jin Gui's maid, Bao Chan. Yang's translation uses **foreignization**, directly translating the idiom as “to cover the land of Shu after getting the region of Long,” preserving the historical and cultural meaning of the idiom. This helps introduce the target language readers to a Chinese cultural expression that may not have a direct equivalent in their language, fostering a deeper understanding of the original culture and evoking interest in Chinese traditions.

Example 6:

Original version: 薛姨妈听见金桂句句挟制着儿子, 百般恶赖的样子, 十分可恨。……实是俗语说的“清官难断家务事”, 此事正是公婆难断床帏事了。

Translation: Aunt Xue, moreover, had no means of knowing who was responsible for the black magic. Just as “Not even good officials can settle family troubles,” so “Not even parents can settle disputes between son and wife.”

The idiom “清官难断家务事” (literally “Even an honest official cannot settle family matters”) comes from *Yushi*

Mingyan, a collection of Chinese stories from the Ming Dynasty. It suggests that family matters are so complicated that even upright officials would find it difficult to make judgments. Here, Aunt Xue cannot resolve the domestic dispute between Xue Pan and his wife Bao Chan, and she is frustrated by it. Yang's translation uses **foreignization** by translating “清官难断家务事” as “Not even good officials can settle family troubles”, maintaining the original idiomatic meaning and conveying the cultural nuance of the expression. This helps the target language reader understand Chinese cultural perspectives on domestic matters and the challenges involved in family disputes, fostering a deeper understanding of the cultural context while preserving the original flavor of the text.

2.3. Application of a Combination of Domestication and Foreignization Strategies

In translation, even if every word in the source text can be translated by using an equivalent word in the target language, it does not necessarily guarantee that the target text will have the same or similar effect on the target audience. This is because readers often interpret the translated content and its spirit based on their own cultural concepts, rather than those of the foreign culture. Some idioms are translated using foreignization to maintain the cultural flavor and national characteristics of the source language, but this may lead to pragmatic errors and make it difficult for readers to understand. On the other hand, using complete domestication may lose the cultural atmosphere of the source language, preventing the reader from fully understanding the purpose and culture of the original text. Therefore, when translating idioms, a combination of foreignization and domestication strategies can be used. In Yang's translation of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, several idiomatic expressions adopt a combination of domestication and foreignization strategies.

Example 7:

Original version: 所谓“方以类聚, 物以群分”二语不错。

Translation version: It was a genuine case of “like attracts like” or “birds of a feather flock together.”

The original meaning of this idiom refers to how people with similar characteristics tend to gather together, and those who share common values often form groups. Here, it refers to how characters like Xiang Yun, Xiang Ling, and Fang Rui have gathered together. In this case, Yang's translation uses a combination of foreignization and domestication strategies. The translation expresses both the literal meaning of the idiom and its implicit meaning. It makes the translation vivid and engaging, and combines the advantages of both foreignization and domestication.

3. Discussion

In Yang's translation of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the choice of domestication and foreignization strategies for idiomatic expressions is not a simple either-or decision but is flexibly applied according to different contexts, cultural backgrounds, and translation goals. Yang and Dai carefully analyzed the specific context of each idiom and chose the appropriate strategy to convey the cultural meaning of the original text as accurately as possible while ensuring that target language readers could easily understand it. For idioms with distinct Chinese cultural features, Yang and Dai generally chose the foreignization strategy, preserving the

cultural essence of the source text. However, in cases where the cultural load was low or where a literal translation might lead to misunderstanding, they preferred to use the domestication strategy, converting the idioms into expressions that were easier for the target audience to understand. This flexible use of translation strategies not only demonstrates the translators' sensitivity to cultural differences and their linguistic skills, but it also enhances the dissemination of the work, allowing the cultural connotations of *Dream of the Red Chamber* to be presented in a broader context.

4. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the application of domestication and foreignization strategies in the translation of idioms in Yang's version of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, translators should choose different translation strategies depending on the author's intent, text type, translation purpose, and the readers' level and needs. In actual translation practice, translators should avoid extremes, such as exclusively using domestication or foreignization. Both strategies should complement each other. A translator should not favor one over the other. Idioms are independent communicative units in terms of syntax, and both English and Chinese idioms are cultural and linguistic condensates. They are essential components of the languages and cultures of both English and Chinese, involving geography, history, social customs, religious beliefs, and a variety of other contexts, whether serious, elegant, implicit, or humorous. Idioms are concise and vivid, yet full of humor. Therefore, appropriate translation is crucial. Translation is not done in a vacuum; the choice between foreignization and domestication is the result of the interplay of various objective and subjective factors. If a translator focuses only on one aspect and neglects the other, the translation task will not be successfully completed. The translator's goal should be to reproduce the original information in the target language as much as possible, thereby contributing to the exchange between different cultures and countries.

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