

# Comparative Study on the Translation of Culture-loaded Words in *Chang Sheng Dian* by Xu Yuanchong and Yang Xianyi from the Perspective of Cognitive Translatology

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**Abstract:** Culture-loaded words contain vocabulary with different cultural connotations between countries and are rich in cultural colors. The essay chooses two mainstream English translation editions of *Chang Sheng Dian* and adopts cognitive translatology as a theoretical framework to carry out a comparative analysis of the culture-loaded words with reference to three aspects: embodiment, interactivity and creativity. Research has found that, as a native Chinese translator, Xu Yuanchong has a stronger understanding of the original text, so he can achieve the similar experience as the original author through cognition and understanding. With regard to interactivity, both sets of translators consider the relationship between the translator and the reader on the basis of experience and interaction with the text and the objective world. In respect of creativity, owing to the cognitive disparities among translators, in order to have a better comprehension of the information that the original author intends to convey, both Xu Yuanchong and Yang Xianyi exercise their creative faculties in individual thinking in terms of word and sentence selection as well as strategy adoption. Moreover, during the translation process, the cognitive backgrounds of the two groups of translators are among the factors that determine the choice of translation strategies, resulting in differences in translation styles between the two translations.

**Keywords:** Cognitive Translatology, *Chang Sheng Dian*, Culture-Loaded Word.

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to explore, summarize, and analyze the similarities and differences in the translation of culture-loaded words in the English versions of *Chang Sheng Dian* by Xu Yuanchong and Yang Xianyi from the perspective of cognitive translatology, based on the embodiment, interactivity and creativity aspects of the theory. Besides, this essay tries to further explore the cognitive situation of translators in different cognitive contexts. At the present stage, domestic translation scholars, inspired by foreign scholars, attempt to analyze the English translation of traditional Chinese literary works from the perspective of cognitive translatology. However, it seems that there are not many studies focusing on drama text. This essay holds the view that a comparative research on the translation of culture-loaded words in *Chang Sheng Dian*, in combination with cognitive translatology, is capable of affording a more profound insight into the translation process. Through probing into the diverse translation manifestations of culture-loaded words, we can amass data regarding traditional cultural translation and enhance our comprehension of traditional Chinese culture.

### 1.1. Research Background

Since globalization has been deepening, various cultures are constantly intermingling. China has been trying to integrate into the world. However, Chinese culture communication still faces many difficulties, and one of the biggest problems is cultural differences. Due to differences in the historical, geographical, and political environments in which people live in different countries, their language and cognition may also differ. Despite this, scholars at home and

abroad can always find a new method to translate untranslatable texts (Sun, 2018), which is because, regardless of the differences between humans, they generally have similar cognitive bases. Hence, to more effectively introduce Chinese culture to international readers and elucidate the linguistic and cognitive distinctions between Chinese and English cultures, scholars have embarked on exploring and researching cognitive translatology, seeking a fresh perspective for analyzing classical Chinese literary works and accelerating the dissemination of Chinese culture globally.

In recent years, Chinese scholars have carried out extensive cognitive translation studies, building upon the foundational theories proposed by foreign academics. Notably, Wu (2000), influenced by linguistic research, categorized translation research into external and internal domains, with the aim of constructing a translation model grounded in psychological realism. Through this, Wu sought to uncover the psychological mechanisms and cognitive patterns underlying translation processes. Besides, Wang (2005) believed that there are both objective and subjective factors in translation. Therefore, on the one hand, translation needs to convey the information of the original author. On the other hand, it also inevitably combines with the translator's position and perspective. In addition, Langacker's (1988) original expression of conceptualization in the characteristics of cognitive translatology was modified and fixed as experiential conceptualization, and this theory was used as a starting point to analyze the similarities and differences between different English versions of the same text and discusses the objectivity and subjectivity of translation.

Culture-loaded words refer to special words, idioms, and colloquialism in a certain culture, are formed in a specific historical environment and geographical background (Fang,

2014: 139). These words directly reflect the gradual accumulation of specific ethnic groups in the long historical process, which is different from the unique lifestyle of other ethnic groups. Given their rich cultural connotations, it is necessary to minimize the lack of culture in the translation process (Liao, 2000). In addition, this kind of vocabulary accumulates the essence of China's social, historical and cultural heritage, contains information that keeps pace with the times, and is a treasure of the traditional culture of China. Hence, culture-loaded words encapsulate the collective experiences of a nation, serving as a vital conduit for the preservation and dissemination of culture across generations and geographical boundaries, as well as for sustaining national and communal identity.

*Chang Sheng Dian* is a masterpiece in the history of Chinese drama written by Hong Sheng. Together with *The Peach Blossom Fan*, it is known as the twin jade of the Qing Dynasty and the twin constellations of ancient Chinese historical dramas (Fu, 2005: 107). Culture-loaded words play an important role in *Chang Sheng Dian*. In the current research on the English translation of *Chang Sheng Dian*, both the description of the characters' clothing, food, housing, and transportation and the historical content of the plot development in the drama involve a large number of culture-loaded words. At present, there are two mainstream translations of *Chang Sheng Dian*, namely, by Xu Yuanchong and Professor Xu Ming, and by Yang Xianyi and his wife. These two translations are written in different periods and have different purposes of translation. To thoroughly examine the cognitive disparities among translators within diverse cognitive contexts, this essay selects the English translation corpus of culture-loaded words found in these two books as its focus of study.

## 2. Culture-loaded Words in *Chang Sheng Dian*

*Chang Sheng Dian* stands as a prominent play in the annals of Chinese drama, with its enduring literary worth and artistic allure capable of transcending time and space through the medium of translation. There are a large number of culture-loaded words appear in its text.

The first type of culture-loaded words appearing in *Chang Sheng Dian* is ecological culture-loaded words. The Chinese version of *Chang Sheng Dian* is a drama describing the poignant love story of Emperor Tang Xuanzong and Lady Yang. There are many place names with Chinese cultural characteristics, such as Soul-Searing Slope, Qujiang, Liucheng and so on.

The second type is material culture-loaded words. In *Chang Sheng Dian*, there are many words that reflect the material characteristics of our country at that time.

The third type is religious culture-loaded words. Religious culture-loaded words can reflect the religious beliefs, history and culture of different peoples. Most people in English-speaking countries believe in Christianity, while most people in China believe in Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism.

The fourth type is social culture-loaded words. *Chang Sheng Dian* portrays the love story between Emperor Xuanzong and Lady Yang within the feudal society of China. The social system during that specific historical era is highly distinct from that of Western nations. The names of characters in Chinese literature and drama pieces are also extremely elaborate, since they are capable of mirroring the character's

disposition or intimating diverse fates.

The last type is linguistic culture-loaded words. Translation is a form of cross-linguistic communication. The disparate phonetic, grammatical, and formative systems across different cultures present significant hurdles in translation. Varying translators adopt diverse methods when translating idioms, slang, dialects, and colloquialisms. However, they all strive for enhanced comprehension by readers.

## 3. Contrastive Analysis on the Translation Based on the Three Elements of Cognitive Translatology

Wang (2005) puts forward the concept of cognitive linguistics in translation, which suggests that translation is based on the multiple interactions involving cognitive subjects (author, reader and translator) in the context of realistic experience, and the reader and translator should try to express the various meanings expressed in the source language on the basis of a thorough understanding, and should make efforts to outline the real world and the cognitive world that the author wants to depict in the translation. This essay selects three characteristics of cognitive translatology related to words and phrases, embodiment, interactivity and creativity to better analyze culture-loaded words.

### 3.1. Analysis on the Embodiment Element in the Translation

Cognitive translatology posits that embodiment is an inherent characteristic of the translation process. The translator's comprehension of the text stems from his or her perception and experience of the objective world (Wang, 2005: 13). Consequently, even though translators invariably endeavor to render translations as proximate as feasible to the original text's expression, owing to the divergent cognitive backgrounds, life experiences of different translators and the original author, the experiential elements manifested in distinct translations will also vary. This will be reflected in the following examples.

Example 1

Xu: The ancient sage did not undervalue love son. (Xu & Xu, 2012: 9)

Yang: Even Confucius did not delete the love poems when he compiled the songs. (Yang & Gladys, 2001: 3)

The word "xiansheng" is a religious culture-loaded word. It refers to Confucius, which contains allusion. Confucius once deleted and revised *The Book of Songs*, intending to retain only three hundred. However, he refrained from deleting *Wei Feng* and *Zheng Feng*, which were regarded by people in that era as conduits of immoral customs. This sentence is extracted from the first scene of *Chang Sheng Dian* and serves the purpose of communicating the author's intention in writing the book. The author employed this allusion herein to draw a parallel between himself and Confucius, as well as between *Chang Sheng Dian* and *Zheng Feng* and *Wei Feng*, insinuating that he was not propagating immoral customs but rather was inspired by the tales of Emperor Tang and Lady Yang. He also predicted that thousands of years later, *Chang Sheng Dian* would be as immortal as *Zheng Feng* and *Wei Feng*.

Yang's translation translates the term exactly, while Xu's translation translates it as "the ancient sage" without referring specifically to Confucius. Consequently, despite the similarity in linguistic forms, Yang's translation is more faithful to the

original text in terms of authenticity and reflects a comparable level of embodiment between the translator and the original author. Moreover, his translation aligns more closely with the author's creative intention in citing Confucius' allusions, thereby enabling a more precise conveyance to readers and attaining the replication of a similar sense of experience for them.

#### Example 2

Xu: Gold can save one from punishment; The premier is the government. (Xu & Xu, 2012: 23)

Yang: As prime minister I have absolute power at court. Let all beware! For whoever tries to encroach. (Yang & Gladys, 2001: 21)

The word “zhongshu” is a social culture-loaded word. It refers to the title of an ancient Chinese civil official position that held a significant standing within the foundational bureaucratic framework established by state decrees during the Sui and Tang dynasties. In the political system of the mid to late Tang dynasties, this position was tantamount to the highest-ranking official in the bureaucracy.

Yang and Xu translate this term as “prime minister” and “the primer” respectively, taking into account the difficulties foreign readers have in understanding ancient Chinese official positions due to the complexity of official titles in various dynasties. Therefore, Yang and Xu both adopt an alternative translation strategy and choose phrases that are similar in meaning to the word for replacement from foreign official positions. This translation not only renders the text in a manner that is comprehensible to readers but also remains faithful to the original meaning, thereby mirroring the shared cognitive experiences of Yang and Xu.

#### Example 3

Xu: Our restaurant stands between the east and the west market where pass many people. (Xu & Xu, 2012: 69)

Yang: Our inn stands just between the east and the west markets, where many people pass. (Yang & Gladys, 2001: 99)

The word “jiulou” is an ecological culture-loaded word. With the advancement of the brewing industry and the burgeoning urban economy, the liquor shop industry flourished during the Tang Dynasty. During this period, the term denoted a substantial establishment that not only offered alcoholic beverages but also catered to dining and feasting needs.

Yang translates it as “inn” while Xu translates it as “restaurant”. Inn can be understood as a relatively small hotel, but it is generally a hotel located in rural areas or along highways. This type of hotel is very popular abroad, usually providing accommodation in addition to a meal. In contrast, a restaurant is a relatively formal place where you spend money to eat. There is a lot of food in the restaurant, but the restaurant does not provide accommodation. This sentence is the waiter's description of the location of Xinfeng Restaurant. It is located in the city center. But in foreign countries, some large hotels are also named after inn. For example, major global hotel chains such as Holiday Inn and Days Inn are often located in downtown areas and are also named after inn. So Yang's translation is fine. But in terms of its size and position, it may be more accurate to translate it as “restaurant”. It can also be seen that due to Yang's early experience abroad, he has a better understanding of mainstream hotel names abroad. Thus the two translators' cognitive backgrounds and experiences in this regard are different.

### 3.2. Analysis on the Interactivity Element in the Translation

The translation process is a process full of comparison, which naturally involves interaction and selection (Wang, 2005: 17). In order to be closer to the intended meaning of the original text and facilitate readers' understanding, translators need to modify or change sentence structures appropriately during the translation process to better demonstrate the emotional, cultural, and color characteristics of the original content, making the translated text more vivid. This will be reflected in the following examples.

#### Example 4

Xu: Since they two parted. They have pretended cold-hearted. (Xu & Xu, 2012: 42)

Yang: After their quarrel neither will give way. (Yang & Gladys, 2001: 60)

The word “shenshang” is an ecological culture-loaded phrase. The term refers to two stars. One appears in the west and the other appears in the east. When one appears, the other disappears. Therefore, it is often used to express the feeling of disharmony.

Through understanding the meaning of the word, Xu translated it as “they two parted”, explaining the state of separation between the two characters. Although no further explanation is provided regarding the cause of the two's separation, Xu's translation can be readily comprehended by readers. This exemplifies the interaction between the translator and the reader. Yang translated it as “quarrel”, which presumptively accounts for the reason for the parting of the two characters in the text, exhibiting the emotional tinge of an unpleasant separation due to their disputes. This is consistent with the textual description that the two characters went their separate ways as a result of a disagreement. From this, it can be seen that Yang, as a translator, better interacts with the original text.

#### Example 5

Xu: Like drunkards who on foot can't stand. Where is the poet sober in a drunkards' land? (Xu & Xu, 2012: 67)

Yang: They are all like drunkards; where is Qu Yuan the poet? Who alone staved sober to sing in a land of drunkards? (Yang & Gladys, 2001: 99)

The word “chudafu” is a social culture-loaded phrase. It refers to the patriotic poet Qu Yuan of the state of Chu.

Yang employs an endnote to provide a more detailed explanation of the phrase “Who alone staved sober to sing in a land of drunkards”. The reason is that within the context of the text, a drunkard does not refer to an individual who is frequently intoxicated, but rather to someone who is oblivious to the current political circumstances and potential perils. There is a comparison between a drunkard and Qu Yuan, and the term here refers to a sober person among a group of people who are ignorant of the danger. Xu and Yang use land to show the number of drunkards in their translation, which not only translates the meaning of the original text on a cognitive level, but also reflects the contrast between the metaphorical drunkard and the real drunkard. Both Yang and Xu express the emotional color of the author's praise for Qu Yuan's noble character, so as to achieve great interaction with the original text.

#### Example 6

Xu: I am no poet drinking wine at leisure nor soldier

seeking in hard drinking for pleasure. (Xu & Xu, 2012: 70)

Yang: I am no wine-loving poet. No rough, hard-drinking soldier. (Yang & Gladys, 2001: 101)

The words “xiantaoling” and “mangguanfu” are social culture-loaded words. They refer to famous historical figures and have a special implied meaning. The first term refers to Tao Yuanming, a famous poet of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, while the second is a righteous man of the Western Han Dynasty who boldly denounced corrupt officials. The two groups of people represented by the two terms are both fond of drinking. But they represent two different attitudes toward life after drinking.

Yang and Xu translate them as “poet drinking wine at leisure and soldier seeking in hard drinking for pleasure” and “wine-loving poet and rough, hard-drinking soldier”, both of which express characteristics of the two terms through describing these two words, reflecting the author's lack of appreciation for both of them. Therefore, both Yang and Xu effectively interpret the attitude implicit in the original text and reflect the principle of interaction.

### 3.3. Analysis on the Creativity Element in the Translation

Human cognition originates from the real world, but there are differences in their cognitive styles and perceptions. Therefore, translation has a certain degree of subjectivity, that is, it has a certain degree of creativity. When translating a source language into a target language, creativity varies depending on the translator's cognitive thinking. Therefore, for the same text, different translators will inevitably have different translations. This will be reflected in the following examples.

#### Example 7

Xu: Behold her headdress quiver and her skirts softly spread! (Xu & Xu, 2012: 3)

Yang: Her jewels quiver, and her skirts swirl softly. (Yang & Gladys, 2001: 3)

The word “buyao” is a material culture-loaded word. It is a piece of traditional Chinese jewelry that is fixed in the hair of a woman. When she walks, the metal beads and jade will keep shaking or hitting, emitting a crisp sound, giving people a visual and auditory beauty, so it is called as “buyao”.

Xu translates the word as “headdress quiver”, which not only translates the feature that the jewelry will tremble as the wearer walks, but also indicates that it is a kind of headdress. Yang's translation of the word as “jewels quiver” underscores its nature as a type of jewelry adorned with gemstones. Both translators exhibit subjectivity, demonstrating their creativity by making apt additions to the original text based on their individual understandings.

#### Example 8

Xu: How much for her I long! Even if I had nectar fine, and food divine, I'd find them tasteless and wrong. (Xu & Xu, 2012: 61)

Yang: How I long for her! Even if I had ambrosia and heavenly elixirs, I should find them tasteless. (Yang & Gladys, 2001: 87)

The word “qiongjiang” is a material culture-loaded word. It refers to a syrup made of beautiful jade, representing fine wine. In Chinese myths and legends, drinking it can lead to immortality. In classical mythology, nectar served as the sustenance and beverage of the gods. When mortals partook of it, they were bestowed with immortality. The elixir of

immortality is a liquid that is reputed to possess magical properties and is regarded as a panacea capable of curing all ailments.

Yang translates it as “nectar,” while Xu renders it as “ambrosia,” both employing alternative translation strategies that solely capture the cultural and mythological connotations. Both of them don't express the meaning of wine in the original text, indicating their creativity.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Major Findings

Cognitive translology indicates that translation is intimately associated with human psychology. It not only mirrors human thinking patterns but also exhibits the traits of people's cognition. The two sets of translators conduct translation operations under the sway of their own thinking and cognitive modalities. The principal elements that have an impact on this activity stem from their personal experiences and cognitive aspects.

From the perspective of embodiment, Xu's translation is more in line with the author's cognitive background, which is also related to Xu's familiarity with traditional Chinese culture and his unparalleled ability to translate classical poetry. Based on the case analysis, it is evident that Xu possesses a profound understanding of the allusions employed by the author in the original text and is capable of restoring the cultural attributes of culture-loaded words during the translation process. In contrast, Yang, owing to his prior experience of residing abroad, is more acquainted with certain foreign elements. Consequently, in the translation process, he has a tendency to substitute the culture-loaded words in the text with foreign nouns of similar meanings. While this may enhance the comprehension of foreign readers regarding the text, it sacrifices the traditional Chinese cultural characteristics that the author intends to convey.

In terms of interactivity, both Xu and Yang engage with the original text and readers during translation. An analysis of their work reveals that Yang tends to emphasize expressing the emotional nuances of characters or imagery in the text, enhancing the translation's vividness and fostering an interactive connection with the original. Conversely, Xu's translations prioritize straightforward descriptions for culturally loaded terms, facilitating readers' understanding and interaction with these elements. However, ultimately, both Xu and Yang consider the translator-reader relationship, grounded in their experiences and interactions with the text and external reality, enabling them to strive for superior translation outcomes.

In terms of creativity, the cognitive disparities between translators Xu and Yang have led them to exhibit unique ingenuity in their choice of wording, sentence structure, and translation strategies. This individual creativity aims to facilitate readers' comprehension of the information intended by the original author.

### 4.2. Conclusion

In the translation process, the translator's cognitive background constitutes one of the factors that govern the selection of translation strategies, and the translator's cognitive disparities have an influence on their translations. Irrespective of the translation strategies adopted by the two groups of translators, the readability and acceptability of the translations were taken into account. Meanwhile, the

translation of drama differs from that of other literary works, as it necessitates considering not only the connotations of words and sentences themselves but also the performance impact on the stage. Although Xu's version only translated the first 25 scenes of the original text, due to his profound understanding of traditional Chinese culture, he not only faithfully renders the content of the original text but also accentuates the beauty of language expression and rhyme during the translation process. Therefore, his artistic value cannot be ignored. In contrast, Yang, due to his upbringing in a family education that combines Chinese and Western cultures and his early experience of living abroad, his translated version is dedicated to creating a fusion of Chinese and Western cultures, which not only does not violate the author's original intention but also allows foreign readers to better understand the text content. But compared to Xu, his version considers less drama and deeper expression of Chinese cultural elements.

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