

# On the Translation of Culture-loaded Words in Amazing Tales

## --First Series from the Perspective of Susan Bassnett's Cultural Translation Theory

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### Abstract

Based on Susan Bassnett's cultural translation theory and supplemented by Eugene Nida's cultural classification, this paper takes the English translation of Yang Shuhui and Yang Yunqin's *Slapping the Table in Amazement: A Ming Dynasty Story* as the main object of study, analyses the translation of culture-loaded words in *Amazing Tales—First Series*, and explores the translation methods and translation strategies used by Yang Shuhui and Yang Yunqin in dealing with the translation of culture-loaded words. This study finds that Yang Shuhui and Yang Yunqin adopted the translation strategy of "foreignization as the main focus and domestication as the supplement", when translating the culturally loaded words. At the same time, the translators combined the translation methods of literal translation, free translation, literal translation + annotation, and free translation + annotation, thus successfully conveying the cultural information of the source language to the target readers and realizing the purpose of cultural exchange.

### Keywords

*Amazing Tales--First Series*; Cultural Translation Theory; Culture-loaded Words; Translation Strategy.

### 1. Introduction

With the implementation of China's cultural "going out" strategy, a vast array of literary works have been continuously translated into foreign languages, among which traditional Chinese literary books with heavy traditional cultural connotations are important works for the dissemination of traditional Chinese culture to foreign countries. How to translate culture-loaded words in the process of English translation of ancient classics is one of the most important tasks in the dissemination of Chinese traditional culture to foreign countries. As an exemplary work of ancient vernacular fiction, *Amazing Tales: First Series* is unique in the ancient classics, and its success cannot be separated from the unique culture-loaded words. Culture-loaded words are the characteristics of each chapter, carrying the cultural connotation of the late Ming urban class and playing an important role in helping readers to fully appreciate the social landscape of the late Ming. Therefore, the translation of culture-loaded words is crucial. This paper takes the culture-loaded words in the English translation of Yang Shuhui and Yang Yunqin's *Slapping the Table in Amazement: A Ming Dynasty Story* as an example, and uses Susan Bassnett's cultural translation theory to analyse the translation of culture-loaded words, and discusses the translation strategies and methods adopted by the translators in the process of translation.

## 2. Literature Review

For a long time, scholars have conducted fewer studies of the book *Amazing Tales: First Series*, mostly focusing on *Er Pai* (*Amazing Tales: First Series* and *Amazing Tales: Second Series*). Up to now, the research has focused on three aspects: artistic characteristics, character images and English version of *Er Pai*.

Huang Wenke (2015) summarized the artistic charm of couplet rhetoric in the book into five characteristics. Then, the author pointed out that the application of couplet rhetoric has added elegance to this popular literary work, making it a masterpiece of both elegance and folklore, so that it has been handed down to the present day[1]. Jin Yifan (2013) selected some examples of translation of colloquialisms and analyzed them in terms of the translation methods of omission, corresponding translation, literal translation, and free translation. Finally, She found that the three translators of the English translation of *Er Pai* adopted the appropriate translation methods, which conveyed the cultural messages of the colloquialisms and facilitated the readers of the target language to understand the colloquialisms more effectively[2]. Liu Yu (2019) pointed out that *Er Pai* breaks the stereotypical image of the past men who are negatively attached to their hearts and portrays a lot of affectionate men, which reflects the ideological trend of the society of that time that attaches great importance to the emotions[3].

## 3. Connotations of Topic Selection

Since this paper is to analyse the translation strategy of culture-loaded words in the English version of *Amazing Tales: First Series* under the guidance of Cultural Translation Theory, this part will briefly introduce the book *Amazing Tales: First Series* and its English translation, and briefly elucidate culture-loaded words.

### 3.1. Introduction to *Amazing Tales--First Series*

*Amazing Tales: First Series* was written by Ling Mengchu at the end of the Ming Dynasty, and is a collection of short stories. There are forty volumes in the book, each of which is a new story. The titles of each volume use the device of couplets, basically explaining the main characters and the places involved, and in some cases also giving a high level summary of the characters' behaviour. The title of each volume uses an antithesis rhetoric figure, basically explaining the main characters and involved locations, and some titles will also make a high level of summary of the characters' behavior. The title of each volume is concise and striking. Each volume of the book has a generally consistent structure, divided into four parts: the introductory remarks, the first recapitulation, the main recapitulation, and the epilogue poem. Each volume opens with a poem or a lyric or a hymn that steps into the body of the book. The body of the book begins with a detailed explanation and related extensions of the poem or hymn used in the opening section, and sometimes further expands on the theme emphasized in the volume with quotations from famous people, sayings, and historical allusions, and is immediately followed by both a short story and a longer one to argue for the truths revealed in the previous section. At the end of each volume there is a poem to wrap up the text, to illuminate the theme of the volume, and to echo the opening poem, creating the beauty of the layout of the article.

On the basis of adapting old stories, wild history and rumors at that time, Ling Mengchu created *Amazing Tales: First Series* by integrating his own thinking about the society at that time. The book is rich in content, involving business, marriage, love, revenge, Taoism, lawsuits, and so on. The events described in the book are closely related to ordinary people, and the characters involved in the book are closely related to people's lives, such as ancient literati, scholars, couples, nuns, old men, merchants, thieves and other ordinary people, rather than noble emperors, generals and heroes away from the people. Naturally, the book involves many

characteristic words of traditional Chinese culture, reflecting the infinite wisdom of the ancient people and highlighting the rich Chinese cultural heritage.

In general, the book uses vernacular Chinese to depict a diverse group of characters from the urban class in the late Ming Dynasty, showing the more open face of the society at that time, and reflecting the fact that the pursuit of money, the ideology of opposing feudal rites, and the promotion of the concept of true love and righteousness had become the social trend in the era of rapid development of commodity economy.

### 3.2. Introduction to *Slapping the Table in Amazement: A Ming Dynasty Story Collection*

As of now, *Slapping the Table in Amazement: A Ming Dynasty Story Collection* is the latest full translation of the book *Amazing Tales: First Series*. The English translation, co-written by the couple Yang Shuhui and Yang Yunqin, was published in 2018. Yang Shuhui is a professor of Chinese at Bates University in the United States, and Yang Yunqin is a senior interpreter at the United Nations. Their extensive knowledge and solid translation skills ensure the production of high-quality translations. Previously, the couple co-translated Feng Menglong's *San Yan*, and their translations were included in the *Library of Chinese Classics*, and their translations were highly praised.

The book *Slapping the Table in Amazement: a Ming Dynasty Story Collection* is a complete reproduction of the writing. In terms of titles, the translator used similar English sentences to translate the Chinese titles with antithesis; In terms of the opening poems, the translators translated the inner meaning of the opening poems of each volume of the original work after understanding the connotation of the poems; In terms of the interpretation of the opening poem in the original text, the translator, after understanding the theme of the original text emphasized by the original author, translated the author's interpretation in easy-to-understand language; In the body of the original text, the translators understood the development of the story in the text, and translated it in a condensed and simple language to accurately convey the message of the story; In terms of the poems at the end of the original work, the translators understood the meaning of the poems at the end of each volume of the original work, and translated the essence of the poems with literary words. In the process of translation, the translators paid much attention to the words with ancient cultural characteristics in the original text, and thus frequently used the foreignization strategy to preserve the cultural characteristics of the original text. In the process of translation, translators mainly use foreignization strategy and domestication strategy as a supplement. The translators mainly used translation methods such as literal translation, transliteration, literal translation+annotation, transliteration+annotation, free translation to retain cultural information unfamiliar to the target language readers and to stimulate the target language readers to understand the cultural connotations in the original text.

The way in which the English translation deals with the words with cultural characteristics is worthy of further exploration. It is not only to translate the cultural information behind the words, but also to retain all the cultural characteristics in the original text, so as to let the original Chinese culture go out of the country as much as possible to overseas readers, so that the target language readers can feel the traditional Chinese cultural characteristics as immersive as possible. The study of the vocabulary with cultural characteristics in this English translation will not only fill the gap in the study of the English translation of *Slapping the Table in Amazement: A Ming Dynasty Story*, but also provide some ideas and references for other workers engaged in the translation of traditional Chinese culture, thus helping the literary works containing Chinese culture to go overseas and spread to all parts of the world in a better way.

### 3.3. Introduction to Culture-loaded Words

Culture-loaded words are also known as "culture-specific words". The foreign scholar Hartman (2002) believes that culture-loaded words are words and phrases that are closely related to the life style of a linguistic social group[4]. It can be seen that culture-loaded words are the condensed embodiment of a nation's lifestyle that has been formed for thousands of years and is different from other nations. The culture-loaded words contain a nation's unique cultural connotation and reflect a nation's unique cultural colour.

Chinese scholars and foreign scholars have different classifications of culture-loaded words, but the one that is generally recognized is Eugene Nida's classification of culture-loaded words. Eugene Nida (1945) classified culture into five categories, namely, ecological culture, material culture, social culture, religious culture, and linguistic culture[5]. Based on this, culture-loaded words are further classified into five categories, namely, ecological culture-loaded words, material culture-loaded words, social culture-loaded words, religious culture-loaded words, and linguistic culture-loaded words. The English translation selected for this paper is a masterpiece of the current translators who are extremely good at interpreting the cultural messages in *Amazing Tales: First Series*. In order to show as many culture-loaded words in the novel as possible, this paper, based on Eugene Nida's classification of culture-loaded words, combined with the culturally distinctive words in the novel, classifies the culture-loaded words in *Amazing Tales: First Series* into material culture-loaded words, social culture-loaded words, religious culture-loaded words, and linguistic culture-loaded words, and explores how the translator of the English Version of the book, under the guidance of Susan Bassnett's Cultural Translation Theory, accurately and correctly translates the culture-loaded words in *Amazing Tales: First Series* so as to enable the readers of the target language to understand the cultural significance of culture-loaded words.

## 4. Theoretical Framework

### 4.1. Introduction to Susan Bassnett's Cultural Translation Theory

In the 1980s, with the rise of cultural school, there was a cultural turn in the field of translation studies. Translation is no longer regarded as the translation between languages but viewed from the macro dimension of culture. 1988, as a representative of the cultural school, Susan Bassnett systematically elaborated the Cultural Translation Theory in her book *TRANSLATION STUDIES*. In a nutshell, the Cultural Translation Theory includes the following four points:

Translation should be based on culture as the unit of translation, and should not rest on previous discourse studies.

Translation is not just a simple process of decoding and restructuring, but more importantly an act of communication.

Translation should not be limited to the description of the source text, but rather to the functional equivalence of that text in the culture of the target language.

There are different principles and norms for translation in different periods of history, but these principles and norms are designed to meet the needs of different periods of history. Translation is to meet the needs of cultures and the needs of different groups in a certain culture(Qiyi Liao 2009)[6].

Language carries culture, and the process of translation is not a simple conversion of literal information between two languages, but an interpretation of the cultural information contained in the original language, and the interpretation is expressed appropriately in the language of translation, to accurately convey the culture of the original language, and to help the target language readers' understanding of the culture of the original language as if they were readers of the original language, so as to achieve the equivalence of the cultural functions of the two

languages.

No matter how similar the two languages are, the social realities they represent are different (Susan Bassnett 2010) [7]. Translators should be familiar with both languages and cultures so as to accurately convey the cultural connotations behind the languages (Bassnett, S. & A. Lefevere 1990) [8].

#### 4.2. Feasibility of Susan Bassnett's Cultural Translation Theory

The book *Amazing Tales: First Series* reflects the folklore of the late Ming Dynasty, showing the state of life of the citizen class and containing rich cultural information. Moreover, the translation of culture-loaded words in the English translation adopts the strategy of "foreignization as the main and domestication as the auxiliary", which accurately conveys the cultural information contained in the words. Therefore, Susan Bassnett's Cultural Translation Theory can be used to analyse the translation of culture-loaded words. Based on the Susan Bassnett's Cultural Translation Theory, this paper explores what kind of translation methods are adopted for the English translation of culture-loaded words, and how to accurately express the cultural meanings carried by the words, so as to achieve the purpose of cultural exchange.

### 5. Analysis on Translation of Culture-loaded Words in English Version of *Amazing Tales--First Series*

This part will analyse the material culture-loaded words, social culture-loaded words, religious culture-loaded words and linguistic culture-loaded words in the book *Amazing Tales: First Series*.

#### 5.1. Material Culture-loaded Words and the Translation

Material Culture-loaded Words refer to the words used by a certain language group to express things with physical forms in production and life. Involving all aspects of food, clothing, housing and transportation, material culture-loaded words are deeply marked by local characteristics and the background of the times. These words often have regional characteristics, indicating that different things are found in different places.

Example(1) 府判叫取文房四宝与他，小娟.....

English Translation: Thereupon, the assistant prefect ordered that the four treasures of the scholar's study be brought to her.

Annotation: The four treasures of the scholar's study are writing brush, ink slab, ink stick, and paper.

The four treasures of the scholar's study are the tools of calligraphy and painting for Chinese literati in ancient Chinese society, and they include writing brush, ink slab, ink stick, and rice paper. The word "文房" is the elegant name for the study, and the name "文房四宝" originated in the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Over thousands of years, although the specific objects involved in the four treasures of the scholar's study have changed, only the origin of the four items has changed, and the four items referred to by the four treasures of the scholar's study are still writing brush, ink slab, ink stick, and rice paper. Writing Brush is a tool used by ancient Chinese people for writing and drawing, unlike Westerners who had written with feathers. Ink Stick is the colouring material used for writing and painting. Rice Paper, one of the outstanding creations of the ancient Chinese people, is different from all kinds of paper in the world. Rice paper is a kind of unique handmade paper specially used for painting and calligraphy with writing brushes. It is flexible in texture, smooth and white, durable and water-absorbing, and enjoys the reputation of "paper available for thousands of years" in the world. In ancient China, when people wrote and painted, the tool used to grind colouring material was the ink slab. Ancient Chinese literati cherish the ink slab very much. They not only put the ink stone in the

study, but also brought it into the coffin when they died. The four treasures of the scholar's study are unique Chinese painting and calligraphy instruments, which are not found in foreign countries. Therefore, according to the principle of cultural translation theory, "culture is put in the first place, and information is put in the second place", the translator adopted the translation method of "literal translation and annotation". The translator first carried out a literal translation according to the literal meaning of the four treasures of the scholar's study, which triggers the readers to think about what the four treasures of the scholar's study are, and stimulates their interest in reading. Then, readers can understand what the four treasures of the scholar's study are when they look at the phrase the four treasures of the scholar's study together with the translator's annotations. Moreover, the readers of the target text can further realize that the four treasures of the scholar's study embodies the efforts of the craftsmen and contains the artistic elegance of the scholars, and thus feel the heavy traditional Chinese culture behind them. In the end, the target language readers' understanding of the background of Chinese culture is enriched, so as to achieve the purpose of cultural exchange.

## 5.2. Social Culture-loaded Words and the Translation

Social Culture-loaded Words involve vocabulary for social customs, social relations and interpersonal communication methods, and to a certain extent they are the product of the sociocultural environment. Social Culture-loaded Words often reflect the traditions of a nation with a distinctive self-imposed imprint, and they are extremely rich in national characteristics.

Example(2) 金声曾将亲女金氏许元子程寿为妻，六礼已备。诟恶远徙台州，背负前约。

English Translation: Jin Sheng betrothed his daughter Jin-shi to my son Cheng Shou. After all the six preliminaries were completed, that evil man moved to Taizhou and broke the betrothal.

Annotation: The six preliminaries are that the groom's family (1) give presents to the prospective bride's family to make the offer of marriage, (2) obtain written documentation of the prospective bride's name and date of birth, (3) secure through divination a good omen endorsing the marriage, (4) send betrothal gifts to the bride's family, (5) seek approval of an auspicious date for the wedding from the bride's family, and (6) send the groom in person to bring the bride home.

The traditional Chinese marriage six etiquettes is the marriage customs and etiquette of the Han nationality in ancient China, and it refers to the six rites involved in the whole process from courtship to consummation of the marriage, including Na Cai, Wen Ming, Na Ji, Na Zheng, Qing Qi and Qin Ying. Na Cai means that the man's parents ask a matchmaker to propose marriage to the woman's family that the man's parents have identified. After the woman's family agrees to the proposal, the man's family sends a matchmaker with certain gifts to formally propose to the woman that the man's parents have identified. Wen Ming means that after the woman's family agrees to discuss the marriage, the woman's family gives her daughter's birth horoscope and birthday to the matchmaker to bring back to the man's family so that the man's family can divine whether or not the woman's birth horoscope and birthday are compatible with the man's birth horoscope and birthday as well as whether or not the two of them are suitable to get married. Na Ji means that the man's family and the woman's family put each other's posts recording dates of birth on the ancestor's case and ask for a sign of good or bad luck, in order to judge whether the birth horoscope and birthday of the two parties' are in conflict with each other. When the two parties know that there is no conflict, the marriage is basically finalized. Na Zheng means that a short period of time before the marriage, the man's family will prepare the bride price, gift money and bride price, appoint a matchmaker and invite two or four female relatives to the woman's home together. Qing Qi means that the man's family chooses an auspicious date for the marriage, and informs the woman's family of the date to ask for their consent. Qin Ying means that on the wedding day, the bridegroom led the matchmaker and friends and relatives together to the bride's home to welcome the bride. After the bridegroom

has paid his respects at the ancestral temple of the bride's family, the bride gets into the sedan chair to the bridegroom's house, where they complete the rituals of worshiping the heaven, the ground, and the ancestors, and finally enter the bridal chamber. According to the requirement of conveying cultural information from cultural translation theory, the translation did not follow the literal meaning of the “六礼” to translate it into six gifts or six rituals, but adopted the translation method of "free translation and annotation" to convey the cultural information in the source language. The translator translated the inner meaning of “六礼”-----the six preliminaries, so that the target language readers will probably realize that the six preliminaries are closely related to marriage. Moreover, the translator added a note of the six preliminaries at the end of the translation, and it briefly explained the details of the six preliminaries. This not only answers the target language readers' doubts about what "the six preliminaries" are, but also allows them to appreciate the different flavors of ancient Chinese traditional marriage customs, so that they have a certain understanding of ancient Chinese marriage culture. In the end, some gaps in the target language readers' cultural background are filled, and the purpose of cultural exchange is achieved.

### 5.3. Religious Culture-loaded Words and the Translation

Religious Culture-loaded Words reflect the religious beliefs and practices of a particular group of human beings. Since ancient times, China has been deeply influenced by the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, while the religious beliefs of overseas countries are Christianity and Islam and so on. The objective existence of national religious and cultural differences requires translators to have a deep understanding of the religious culture system and accurately convey the religious cultural connotation carried by religious words.

Example(3) 通诚以毕，赵尼姑敲动木鱼，就念起来

English Translation: Having spoken these words, she began to rap on a wooden fish and intone the sutra.

Annotation: A wooden fish is a round, carved, wooden resonator that is struck by Buddhist monks and nuns to keep the rhythm while chanting sutras.

The wooden fish is a musical instrument shared by Buddhists and Taoists. Because it is made of wood and shaped like a fish, the wooden fish is named according to its characteristics. Since the fish does not close its eyes all day long, the wood is made in the shape of a fish, so that the Buddhist monks and Taoist priests can keep pondering on the Tao as they struck the wooden fish. The wooden fish is often used in Buddhist and Taoist rituals and pujas, such as chanting sutras and confessions. According to the requirement of conveying cultural information from cultural translation theory, the translator has adopted the translation method of "literal translation and annotation" to convey the cultural information in the source language. The translator's literal translation of “木鱼” as "a wooden fish" is bound to cause confusion among the target language readers, who will not know what a wooden fish looks like and what it is used for. However, the translator has added a note at the end of the text, briefly explaining the material, shape and use of the object "a wooden fish". This will make the target language readers have a clear understanding of "wooden fish". However, this note only explains the Buddhist monks but not Taoism, which is a bit inappropriate. By replacing it with "A wooden fish is a round, carved, wooden resonator that is struck by Buddhist monks and nuns and Taoist priests to keep the rhythm while chanting sutras.", both Buddhism and Taoism will be taken into account, which is clearer for the readers to understand. All in all, the translator has preserved the characteristic products of the source language culture and, through the annotations, has enabled the readers of the target language to understand the important things in Chinese Buddhism and Taoism, to appreciate the unique connotations of the religious culture. This has contributed to the further spread of Buddhist and Taoist cultures overseas, thus promoting in-depth cultural exchanges.

#### 5.4. Linguistic Culture-loaded Words and the Translation

Linguistic Culture-loaded Words, rooted in the cultural heritage of the work, creates the unique linguistic atmosphere of the work and reflects the linguistic style of the work. In the process of translation, the cultural information of such words should be expressed. Linguistic Culture-loaded Words include four-character words, idioms, two-part allegorical sayings and so on. Some unique oral expressions also belong to the category of linguistic culture-loaded words.

Example(4) 胯下曾酬一饭金，谁知剧盗有情深。

English Translation: Han Xin richly rewarded an old woman; A bandit turned out to be just as generous.

Annotation: Before Han Xin (d. 196 bce) rose to power, an old woman washing clothes by the river noticed that he looked hungry and gave him some food. After he became commander in chief under Liu Bang (later to be the first emperor of the Han dynasty), he sought out the old woman and gave her a reward of a thousand pieces of gold.

The word“胯下”in the original text refers to “胯下之辱”, implying that the person involved in the sentence is Han Xin. “一饭金” is the short form of the idiom and allusion of “一饭千金”, which contains a historical story: Han Xin, the Marquis of Huaiyin, often fished by the river to satisfy his hunger before he achieved great military success, and lived a life without full food; an old woman by the river, seeing him pitifully, often gave him her own food to eat, without expecting any return; after Han Xin's success, he returned to the local area, and presented the old woman with 1,000 tael of gold and a lot of gourmet delicacies. The purpose of the source text “胯下曾酬一饭金” is to show that Han Xin was generous in repaying the old woman's kindness, rather than emphasizing Han Xin's forbearance through other people's crotches. According to the requirement of conveying cultural information from cultural translation theory, the translator did not follow the literal meaning of “一饭金”, but adopted the free translation to translate the inner meaning of “一饭金” - Han Xin's repayment of the old woman's kindness. Not only that, the translator also added a note at the end of the article to briefly explain the story between Han Xin and the old woman. This not only eliminates the confusion of the target language readers about the sudden emergence of Han Xin, but also conveys to the readers the meaning of the allusion to “一饭金”, and makes them fully understand the meaning of the allusion to “一饭金”, so that the purpose of cultural exchange is achieved.

#### 6. Conclusion

This paper finds that the translators often use the translation method of "literal translation + annotation" when translating material culture-loaded words, so as to preserve the material expressions in the original language culture, and present the differences between the original language culture and the cultural background of the target language readers to the target language readers in the original language, so as to arouse their interest in further reading. At the same time, adding notes at the end of the article will not make the readers lose their interest in continuing to read when they see the large explanatory text, nor will it make the readers have questions after reading the whole story. In this way, the readers' feelings are fully taken into account and the cultural information in the source language is conveyed to them in an appropriate way. When translators translate social culture-loaded words, they often use the translation method of "free translation + annotation". In this way, the translators first translated the inner meaning of the social culture-loaded words, so that the target language readers can have an approximate understanding of the words and keep their interest in reading. Then, the target language readers can accurately understand the cultural information carried by these words through the annotation. When translators translate religious culture-loaded words, they often use the translation method of "literal translation + annotation" to preserve



the unique expressions of religious culture and stimulate the readers' interest in exploring religious culture. Then, readers can learn more about the cultural characteristics of religions according to the translators' annotation. When translating linguistic culture-load words, the translators often use the translation method of "free translation + annotation". They firstly translated the meaning of the linguistic culture-load words to make them easier for the readers to understand, and then used the annotation to further explain the cultural connotation behind the sayings, idioms, and allusions to accurately convey the cultural information to the target language readers.

Under the guidance of cultural translation theory, this paper studies the translation strategies of culture-loaded words in Yang Shuhui and Yang Yunqin's translation of *Slapping the Table in Amazement: A Ming Dynasty Story*, which involves four strategies, namely, literal translation, free translation, free translation + annotation, and literal translation + annotation. These four translation strategies can help many translators to deal with the problem of translating cultures carried by culture-loaded words, and provide some references for many translators to translate the materials of Chinese culture, so as to help the Chinese culture to go overseas better.

## Notes

All translation examples were drawn from Mengchu Ling(2008)[9], and Shuhui Yang, Yunqin Yang(2018)[10].

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