

A Study on the English Translation of Culture-Loaded Words in The Peony Pavilion under the Threshold of Ecological Translation Studies

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Abstract: In the context of globalization, the international dissemination of the Kunqu classic, "The Peony Pavilion," holds immense significance. Utilizing the ecological translation's three-dimensional transformation theory as an analytical framework, this research delves into the English translation tactics employed for culturally specific terms within "The Peony Pavilion," along with their cross-cultural communication impacts, through a combination of textual analysis and comparative studies. The investigation reveals that the translation approach for these culturally loaded expressions is marked by adaptive selections across three facets: linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. Consequently, translators must strike a delicate equilibrium between preserving cultural authenticity and ensuring audience receptivity during the translation process. This study not only expands the boundaries of the application of ecological translation in the field of opera but also provides strategic references for the English translation of classic operas and helps Chinese culture "go out."

Keywords: The Peony Pavilion; Ecological Translation; Culturally Loaded Words; Three-Dimensional Transformation; Cross-Cultural Communication

1. INTRODUCTION

"The Peony Pavilion," a masterpiece penned by Ming Dynasty opera composer Tang Xianzu, holds a crucial place in Chinese literary history and serves as a vital vehicle for Chinese traditional culture. Through its distinctive artistic appeal and profound cultural significance, this play captures the cultural essence and values of Ming Dynasty society. As one of the pioneering traditional opera forms inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, Kunqu embodies a profound historical and cultural legacy, along with a distinctive aesthetic value that stands out (Q. J. Li et al., 2022). Among them, The Peony Pavilion, as a classic work of Kunqu opera, has become

an important symbol of Chinese opera culture with its beautiful lyrics, twisted emotional stories, and profound cultural connotations. In the realm of globalization, advancing the international reach of "The Peony Pavilion" not only amplifies the global profile of Chinese culture but also fosters mutual understanding and interaction among diverse cultural landscapes. As a model of Chinese opera, Kunqu's unique performance form and profound cultural connotation make it an important window for the world to understand Chinese culture. In recent times, kunqu has garnered considerable attention during both domestic and international tours, thanks to modern stage technology and novel performance styles. Notably, the triumphant staging of the youthful rendition of "The Peony Pavilion" has sparked a surge of interest and enthusiasm among the younger generation towards embracing traditional culture (Zhou, 2011). Culture-loaded words refer to those words that contain specific cultural connotations, which convey philosophical ideas, social customs, and aesthetic imagery (Mengxin, 2024). In *The Peony Pavilion*, there are a large number of culture-loaded words, such as "cape," "scholar," "yin and yang," etc. These words not only carry rich cultural information but also reflect the uniqueness of traditional Chinese culture, which is the key to understanding the cultural connotation of the work. These words not only carry rich cultural information but also reflect the uniqueness of traditional Chinese culture, which is the key to understanding the cultural connotation of the works, and they also occupy a central position in opera translation (Chang & Zhang, 2020). The translation of culturally specific terminology has long posed a significant challenge in cross-cultural exchanges. The task lies in accurately conveying these cultural nuances while ensuring they remain comprehensible and appealing to readers in the target language. Culturally loaded words not only have linguistic significance but also contain deep cultural background and historical origin, but most of the existing research focuses on the linguistic perspective and lacks a systematic analysis from the perspective of ecological translation (Yang & Mustafa, 2024). Recently, eco-translation, an emerging concept in translation studies, has offered a fresh perspective on tackling this issue. Eco-translation emphasizes the study of translation from the perspective of ecology, focusing on adaptation and selection in the process of translation, as well as the translator's subjectivity in the process of translation (Xiong et al., 2023). This theoretical framework provides more comprehensive and systematic theoretical support for the translation research of culturally loaded words. Within the framework of eco-

translation, the rendering of culturally specific terms transcends mere linguistic transformation; it becomes a bridge for cultural dialogue and exchange (Liu & Xu, 2024). In the backdrop of globalization, ecological translation of culturally loaded Chinese terms serves as a vital tool to uphold the equilibrium of the global linguistic and cultural ecosystem (Feng et al., 2025). By improving the translation ecosystem of culturally loaded Chinese words and upgrading the quality of translators, it fosters the dissemination of traditional Chinese culture abroad and deepens cultural interaction and mutual understanding between China and other nations. According to ecological translation science, the translation of culturally loaded words should focus on the harmonious symbiosis of the ecological environment and emphasize the subjectivity of the translator and the adaptability of the translation behavior (Wu, 2022). This research endeavors to delve into the English translation tactics for culturally loaded expressions in "The Peony Pavilion" through the lens of ecological translation studies, with the objective of advancing the international reach of Chinese literary works. By synthesizing the accomplishments and limitations of prior research on translating culturally loaded terms, we aim to contribute to this field and, at the same time, analyze the typical culturally loaded words in 'The Peony Pavilion' in-depth, combining it with the theoretical framework of Ecological Translation Studies, exploring the strategies of their English translation, and systematically sorting out the problem of the translation of culturally loaded words, with a view to providing a set of more systematic theoretical and practical guidance for the translation of culturally loaded words. This research contributes to enriching the application of ecological translation studies in translating classical literature, offering valuable insights for other studies focused on culturally loaded word translations. At a theoretical level, it seeks to broaden the scope of ecological translation studies within the realm of opera. Ecological Translation Studies underscores the ecological adaptability of translation endeavors and emphasizes maintaining a dynamic balance throughout the translation process. Applying the theory of Ecological Translation Studies to the study of the English translation of the culturally loaded words in 'The Peony Pavilion' can provide new theoretical perspectives and methodological guidance for the translation of opera. From a practical point of view, this study provides strategic references for the English translation of classical operas, which helps Chinese culture to "go out." . As globalization intensifies and cross-cultural exchanges flourish, promoting China's rich traditional culture to

the global audience has emerged as a pivotal topic in contemporary cultural research. By examining the translation strategies employed for culturally loaded terms, this study aims to resolve the tension between cultural information dissemination and audience reception, thereby enhancing the quality and impact of opera translations. As a treasure of traditional Chinese culture, the study of the English translation of *Peony Pavilion*'s culturally loaded words is an important model for promoting the overseas dissemination of Chinese culture. Through this study, it can provide useful insights for the translation of other Chinese literary works and promote the international dissemination of Chinese culture.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF ECOLOGICAL TRANSLATION

2.1 Theoretical Traceability and Development

Ecological translation, an innovative translation theory proposed and refined by Hu Gengshen, encompasses a wide range of research foci such as ecological paradigms, correlation chains, ecological rationality, purpose-driven translation, the translational ecological environment, translator-centricity, adaptation/selection processes, three-dimensional transformations, and post-translational assessments (Hu & Tao, 2016). In addition, ecological translation also emphasizes the “adaptation/choice” of translation behavior, which is not only a language conversion but also a cultural adaptation and choice (Hui, 2023). At its core, ecological translation emphasizes the "translation adaptation and selection theory," highlighting the translator's centrality and the necessity of three-dimensional transformations (Bhatt, 2020). From an ecological perspective, this theory views translation activities as an intricate ecosystem, emphasizing the importance of maintaining dynamic balance and fostering ecological interactions during the translation process. The emergence of ecological translation studies not only mirrors the transformation of social civilization within translation research but also stands as a testament to the inevitable evolution of modern philosophical thought. Ecological translation science has important applicability to opera translation. Opera translation, as a multifaceted artistic endeavor, entails more than just linguistic conversion; it also involves the dissemination of culture and the adjustment of communicative nuances. Throughout the translation process, it is crucial to maintain a dynamic equilibrium between

the ecological systems of the source and target languages, ensuring that the translated text achieves ecological harmony in the realms of language, culture, and communication (Bhatt, 2020).

2.2 Connotation of Three-Dimensional Translation Theory

The three-dimensional transformation theory of ecological translation encompasses the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions, which are interconnected and collectively form the ecosystem of translation endeavors.

2.2.1 Linguistic Dimension

The linguistic dimension is concerned with the adaptive reconstruction of syntactic structure and rhetorical devices. When translating "The Peony Pavilion," the linguistic dimension necessitates careful consideration of preserving the rhythmic beauty of the original text in the target language. For example, the treatment of poetic couplets can be creatively reconstructed, such as Xu Yuanchong's translation of "What a riot of brilliant light and glorious sight!" For example, Xu Yuanchong translates "What a riot of brilliant light and glorious sight!" as "What a riot of brilliant light and glorious sight!" which retains the sense of rhythm, though sacrificing strict alignment (Liu & Meng, 2018; Tang & Chen, 2023). In addition, the abbreviation of four-letter words is also a common language transformation strategy; for example, "花容月貌" is translated as "radiant beauty" (Amenador & Wang, 2022).

2.2.2 Cultural Dimension

The cultural dimension involves the strategy of cultural default compensation and cross-cultural transplantation of imagery. In The Peony Pavilion, culturally loaded words such as "the Hall of Hades" and "the Cowherd and the Weaving Maiden" need to be dealt with appropriately in the translation. For example, "the Court of Yama" is translated as "the Court of Yama" in the way of phonetic translation and commentary, which not only preserves the cultural characteristics but also facilitates the readers' understanding. Equally important is the cultural dimension, where elucidating cultural allusions, like "the Cowherd and Weaver Girl, lovers forever separated by the Milky Way," enhances readers' understanding of the text's cultural context.

2.2.3 Communicative Dimension

The communicative dimension underscores the translator's adaptability to the cognitive preferences of the target audience. In this regard, translating "The Peony Pavilion" involves streamlining redundant information and reinforcing contextual cues to boost the translation's acceptability. For instance, the phrase "Love is of a source unknown, yet it grows ever deeper" remains unchanged in the translation, simplifying its philosophical abstraction while emphasizing its universal appeal. In addition, contextual compensation is also an important means of communication dimension conversion, such as "the gate to the underworld," which is a clear metaphor for life and death (Xiao, 2024).

2.3 Theoretical Innovations

Drawing from ecological translation theory, this research introduces the concept of the "opera translation ecosystem," highlighting the intricate interplay among text, translator, audience, and media. This framework not only deepens the theoretical understanding of ecological translation but also offers a fresh perspective for opera translation practices. By establishing this "opera translation ecosystem," we can more effectively facilitate the adaptive selection of culturally specific terms across the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions, thereby enhancing the quality and impact of opera translations. This study innovatively applies ecological translation theory to the English translation of culturally specific terms in "The Peony Pavilion," emphasizing the importance of adaptation and selection in the translation process, along with the translator's active role in shaping the translation. This theoretical framework provides a new perspective for the translation study of culturally loaded words and helps to solve the problem of cultural information transmission in the translation of culturally loaded words. In addition, this study focuses on analyzing the translation of culturally loaded words from the three dimensions of linguistic, cultural, and communicative and proposes specific translation strategies, which are of strong practical guidance significance.

3. CLASSIFICATION AND TRANSLATION DIFFICULTIES OF CULTURALLY LOADED WORDS IN THE PEONY PAVILION

3.1 Classification System

Culture-loaded words refer to those words that contain specific cultural connotations, and they have an irreplaceable role in conveying cultural information. In *The Peony Pavilion*, culturally loaded words can be

categorized into the following three main types: Material culture words: these words involve specific material objects, such as costumes and artifacts.

For example, “Feng Guan Xiapi” is the dress of ancient Chinese women when they get married, symbolizing the sanctity of marriage and the beauty of women; “incense burner” is often used in rituals and religious activities, with a strong cultural symbolism (Khoshafah, 2023). Institutional culture words: These words are related to social systems and ritual norms, such as the imperial examination system, marriage rituals, and customs. For example, “scholar” is the highest honor in the ancient Chinese imperial examinations, representing the individual's knowledge and achievements; “three books and six rituals” is an important etiquette in traditional Chinese marriages, reflecting the solemnity and norms of marriage (Q. Li et al., 2022). Spiritual and cultural words: These words involve philosophical ideas, religious beliefs, literary allusions, etc., and have profound cultural connotations. For example, “yin and yang” is an important philosophical concept in traditional Chinese culture, which represents the unity of opposites in the universe; “Wushan cloud and rain” originates from ancient Chinese myths, symbolizing the beauty and mystery of love (Feng, 2012).

3.2 Translation difficulties

The translation of culturally loaded words faces many challenges (Zhang & Liu, 2023), which are mainly reflected in the following aspects:

(1) Semantic Vacancy due to Cultural Specificity: Many of the culturally loaded words in *The Peony Pavilion* are distinctively culturally specific, which makes it difficult to find the corresponding Western cultural concepts in the translation process. For example, the “girl's school” is a form of women's education in ancient China, but there is no corresponding concept in the Western education system, which makes the translation extremely difficult.

(2) The limit of translatability of poetic language: The lyrics of *The Peony Pavilion* are of high artistic value, with beautiful language, harmonious rhymes, and full of poetic meaning. However, it is often difficult for this poetic language to completely retain its original rhythm and imagery in the process of translation. For example, the rhetorical devices such as counterpoint and superimposed characters in the lyrics, although they have

a unique beauty in Chinese, it is difficult to find a completely corresponding form of expression in English, which restricts the translatability of the poetic language (Desjardins, 2006).

(3) Transmission and acceptance of cultural connotation: Culturally loaded words not only carry rich cultural information but also convey specific cultural values. A crucial challenge in translation lies in accurately conveying cultural connotations while ensuring they remain comprehensible and appealing to target language readers. For example, the philosophical concept of “yin and yang” has far-reaching significance in Chinese culture, but it is relatively unfamiliar in Western culture, so how to retain its cultural connotation in translation and at the same time make it understandable to the Western readers is an issue that needs to be explored in depth.

4. ANALYSIS OF TRANSLATION STRATEGIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THREE-DIMENSIONAL CONVERSION (Shan & Hu, 2024)

4.1 Linguistic Dimension Conversion: Formal Adaptation and Creative Reconstruction

In the translation of *The Peony Pavilion*, the core of language dimension conversion lies in how to adapt to the English language habits while retaining the rhythm and rhythmic beauty of the original text. This kind of conversion requires not only creative reconstruction in form but also deep understanding and transmission of cultural connotations. From the perspective of the linguistic dimension, Xu Yuanchong's translation of “A Beautiful Day for a Good Hour” preserves the rhythm and rhyme of the original text by sacrificing the strict form of counterpoint, reflecting the adaptive choice of the linguistic dimension. This objective aligns with the fundamental principle of eco-translation, which advocates for translations that adapt to the linguistic conventions of the target language while creatively reshaping the form to preserve the original meaning (Xu, 2024). Take Xu Yuanchong's translation of “What a riot of brilliant light and glorious sight!” as an illustration. Instead of preserving the counterpoint form verbatim, he cleverly adjusts the imagery and syntax, thereby successfully conveying the original text's meaning. Despite not maintaining the exact counterpoint structure, the mood and emotion of the original are aptly captured through these adjustments. This approach resonates with

the ecological translation theory, which emphasizes the importance of adapting language transformations to suit the expression habits of the target language. When translating rhetorical devices, it is imperative to adapt to the original's style, with this creative transformation not only adhering to English expression norms but also effectively communicating the intended meaning. The simplification of four-character idiomatic expressions underscores the language dimension's adaptability. For instance, translating "花容月貌" as "radiant beauty" exemplifies lexical-level adaptation, which not only preserves the core imagery but also adapts to the English language habits through the compression at the lexical level. It is crucial to select an equivalent translation for Chinese four-character idioms that aligns with the original meaning. Additionally, English translations of these idioms frequently achieve linguistic dimension adjustments through lexical shifts, and this case retains the core imagery through the form of compression, which embodies the adaptive treatment of the linguistic differences between Chinese and English (Yang, 2010). Four-character lattice vocabulary has a unique rhythmic beauty in Chinese, but it is difficult to find the exact corresponding form in English. Through the reduced translation, it is concise and clear while retaining the original meaning.

4.2 Cultural Dimension Transformation: Dynamic Balance between Alienation and Naturalization

Cultural dimension transformation involves the compensation of cultural defaults and the strategy of cross-cultural transplantation of imagery. In the translation of *The Peony Pavilion*, in terms of cultural dimension transformation, striking a balance between foreignization and domestication is vital to preserve cultural identity while enhancing comprehension for target language readers. In addressing the cultural dimension of translating "The Peony Pavilion," a delicate equilibrium must be struck between alienation and naturalization.

For example, "the Court of Yama" is translated as "the Court of Yama," which adopts the method of phonetic translation and commentary, which not only preserves the cultural characteristics but also helps the readers to understand the cultural background through the commentary. This treatment is in line with the requirement of cultural transformation in ecological translation, i.e., conveying cultural connotations through the strategy of naturalization or alienation

(Beissinger et al., 1999). The treatment of allusions is also an important manifestation of cultural dimension transformation. For example, "Cowherd and Weaving Maiden" is rendered as "lovers perpetually separated by the Milky Way," which enriches the cultural context through augmentation. This translation not only honors the original allusion but also enhances readability for the target audience. This aligns with the notion of "dynamic equivalence in cultural connotations," where cultural characteristics are preserved while incorporating additions or annotations to aid comprehension.

4.3 Communicative Dimension Conversion: Audience Cognition and Emotional Resonance

The communicative dimension transformation underscores the translator's need to adapt to the cognitive patterns of the target language readers. In the translation of *The Peony Pavilion*, communicative transformation needs to consider how to enhance the acceptability of the translated text by simplifying redundant information and strengthening contextual hints. For example, in translating "Love is of a source unknown" from "The Peony Pavilion," the phrase remains unchanged in English, underscoring the importance of maintaining the essence while ensuring it resonates with the intended audience, which strengthens the universality of the translation by weakening the philosophical abstraction and makes it easier to arouse the emotional resonance of the target language readers. In addition, "the gate to the underworld" is translated as "the gate to the underworld," which helps readers better understand the context of the original text by clarifying the metaphor of life and death. This treatment finds a balance between contextual compensation and reader acceptance. The translation of "The Peony Pavilion" exemplifies the "three-dimensional transformation" theory within the framework of ecological translation. Within the linguistic dimension, the rhythmic charm and poetic beauty of the original text are meticulously preserved through innovative reconstruction and adaptive formatting; in the cultural dimension, rich cultural connotations are conveyed through the dynamic balance between alienation and naturalization; in the communicative dimension, the acceptability and emotional resonance of the translated text are enhanced by simplifying redundant information and strengthening contextual hints. These translation strategies not only realize the effective transmission of cultural information but also provide useful references for

the translation of other literary works.

5. TRANSLATION EFFECT EVALUATION AND COMMUNICATION INSIGHTS

The evaluation of translation effect needs to be carried out in multiple dimensions to ensure that the translation reaches a balance in terms of cultural information transmission, acceptability of the translated language, and artistic infectiousness. The specific evaluation criteria are as follows: (1) Integrity of cultural information transmission: whether the translation accurately conveys the rich cultural connotations contained in the culturally loaded words of the original text, including philosophical thoughts, social customs, and aesthetic imagery.

(2) Assessing the translation's acceptability involves examining its alignment with the linguistic conventions of the target language, its ease of comprehension and acceptance by the target readers, and its effectiveness in averting cultural misunderstandings.

(3) Artistic influence: whether the translation retains the literary and artistic qualities of the original text, whether it can arouse the emotional resonance of the target language readers, and whether it has certain aesthetic value. In the practice of English translation of 'The Peony Pavilion', some translations have successfully realized the transmission of cultural information and readers' acceptance through clever translation strategies. Cyril Birch's translation builds a "subtextual ecology" through footnotes to assist cultural understanding, which not only preserves the cultural characteristics of the original text but also helps readers understand its cultural connotations. When translating poems, Xu Yuanchong emphasized preserving the rhythm and rhyme beauty of the original text. Despite the success of some translations in terms of cultural information transmission and reader acceptance, there is still some room for improvement.

(1) Constructing a multimodal translation ecology: combining subtitles, annotations, stage performances, and other multi-channels to compensate for cultural information.

For example, in stage performances, subtitles and narration can be used to help the audience better understand the connotation of culturally loaded words.

(2) Enhancing cultural background introduction: Incorporating a concise cultural background introduction in the translated text enhances readers'

comprehension of the original text's cultural depth. Various factors contribute to the translation's comprehensibility, including linguistic expression, the inclusion of cultural context, and the translator's proficiency. For example, for some important cultural allusions, detailed notes can be added before or after the translation. (3) Carry out a reader acceptance survey: through questionnaires and interviews, gain insight into the reception and feedback provided by the target language readers towards the translated text, and further optimize the translation strategy according to the readers' feedback.

5.1 Reader Acceptance Survey Data

According to related research, reader acceptance survey data can provide an important reference for translation effect evaluation. First of all, readers' ability to understand the content of the translated text is the basis for successful translation. The translation's acceptability is not solely contingent upon linguistic accuracy but is also closely tied to the cultural backdrop and reading preferences of the target audience. Finally, the readability of the translation is equally important. Readability involves richness of content, vividness of style and artistic influence, and readers are more inclined to choose those translations with rich content, vivid language, and unique style. Specifically for the translation of *The Peony Pavilion*, the reader acceptance survey can provide the following insights: (1) Treatment of culturally loaded words: For culturally loaded words, readers are more inclined to accept translations that convey the cultural background through annotations or explanations.

For example, “the Court of Yama” (阎罗殿) is translated phonetically with annotations, and readers' acceptance is higher. (2) Strategies of Poetry Translation: In poetry translation, readers are more inclined to accept translations that retain the rhythm and rhyme of the original text. For example, Xu Yuanchong translated “What a riot of brilliant light and glorious sight!” into “What a riot of brilliant light and glorious sight!” which is more acceptable to readers. (3) Introduction of cultural background: The more aligned the translation is with the cultural nuances of the target language, the more readily it is embraced. Readers appreciate the inclusion of cultural annotations in translations, viewing them as crucial aids in grasping the cultural essence of the source text. For example, when Bai Zhi translated “Gautang,” he explained its cultural background through the annotations, and the readers' acceptance was high. Through these survey data, by understanding readers' reception of the English

version of "The Peony Pavilion," we can refine our translation strategies to enhance the overall translation quality.

6. CONCLUSION AND PROSPECT

Utilizing the three-dimensional transformation theory within the framework of ecological translation, this study meticulously examines the English translation of culturally rich terminology in "The Peony Pavilion." It delves into the strategic adaptations of these terms across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. The findings reveal that this theoretical model offers a comprehensive approach to translating operas., especially in the treatment of culturally loaded words, which fully embodies the translator's subjectivity and ecological adaptability. Through creative reconstruction, such as the treatment of poetic pairs and the reduction of four-character vocabulary, the translator adapts to the linguistic habits of English while retaining the sense of rhythm and rhythmic beauty of the original text; through the dynamic balance of alienation and naturalization, such as the phonetic translation of religious terminology with annotations and the augmented translation of allusions, the translator retains the cultural characteristics while helping the target language readers to understand the cultural connotations; by streamlining extraneous details and bolstering contextual cues, the translator enhances the text's translatability. The translator enhances the acceptability of the translation and improves the emotional resonance of the readers. In addition, this study verifies the effectiveness of the translation strategy through reader acceptance survey data. The survey results show that comprehensibility, acceptability, and readability of the translated text are the key factors affecting reader acceptance. Through annotation, augmentation, and cultural background introduction, translators are able to better convey cultural information and improve the acceptability of the translated text. Although this study has achieved certain results at the theoretical and practical levels, there are still some issues that deserve further exploration. Future research can be carried out in the following aspects: (1) In the digital era, the translation ecology of operas has undergone substantial shifts. Potential avenues for future research include exploring the ethical considerations of AI-assisted translation and leveraging digital tools to optimize translation efficiency and quality. (2) The impact of cross-media communication on translation strategies: opera is not only disseminated through texts but also through various media such as stage performances,

film, and television productions. Future research can explore the impact of cross-media communication on translation strategies and how to improve the communication effect of culturally loaded words through multimodal translation ecology. (3) Long-term tracking study of readers' acceptance: By tracking readers' acceptance of translations over a long period of time, the long-term effects of translation strategies can be better understood. Future research can design long-term reader acceptance surveys to collect more feedback data to optimize translation strategies. In essence, this study introduces a fresh perspective and methodology for translating culturally significant words in "The Peony Pavilion" through the lens of ecological translation's three-dimensional transformation theory. Future research can build on this foundation to further explore the theory and practice of opera translation and promote the international dissemination of Chinese opera culture.

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