

# A Study on the English Translation of Culturally-loaded Words from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics

## Taking "The Wedding Party" as an Example

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### ABSTRACT

Root-seeking novels depict local folk culture from a modern perspective, constructing images of rural China and folk China for readers. However, their cross-cultural dissemination faces the dilemma of local language and cultural translation barriers. The reason for this is that, influenced by cultural differences between China and foreign countries, the translation of culturally-loaded words carrying national culture and customs often fails to convey meaning, which in turn affects the acceptance and recognition of root-seeking novels by overseas readers. Guided by the theory of reception aesthetics and centred on readers, this article analyses the translation strategies of culturally-loaded words in "The Wedding Party", aiming to improve readers' acceptance of the translation and promote the cross-cultural dissemination of root-seeking novels.

**Keywords:** Reception aesthetics, Root-seeking novels, Culturally-loaded words.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary root-seeking novels uphold cultural root-seeking consciousness and restore regional culture from a folk perspective, which has important value for scholars in China and foreign countries to study sociology and traditional Chinese culture. [3] As one of the representative works of contemporary Chinese novelist Liu Xinwu, "钟鼓楼" (zhōng gǔ lóu, the original Chinese novel's name of "The Wedding Party") presents the customs and daily life scenes of specific regions, making it included in the category of "root-seeking novels". [4] The novel takes the twenty-four hours marriage experience of the Xue family as a narrative clue in time and space, and uses modern techniques to depict the joys and sorrows of traditional folk life. It constructs a landscape of Beijing's folk life for readers, known as the "Riverside Scene in Beijing".

At present, the cross-cultural dissemination of contemporary Chinese root-seeking novels has achieved initial results. However, due to the differences in language and culture between China

and foreign countries, the transmission of local languages and cultures with unique traditional Chinese cultural colors often becomes a challenge in the translation of root-seeking novels. In addition, in the cross-cultural dissemination of root-seeking novels, readers' recognition and acceptance are also key factors affecting the internationalization of Chinese root-seeking literature. Due to the fact that the translation and introduction of contemporary Chinese root-seeking novels mainly rely on the spontaneous actions of Western sinologists, the overseas readers of root-seeking novels are mostly limited to professional researchers interested in Chinese culture, and the acceptance of ordinary readers is not high. These indirectly indicate that such literary works have not yet become popular best-selling works among overseas readers.

Coincidentally, the theory of reception aesthetics points out that readers are the center and emphasizes the impact of readers' acceptance on the dissemination validity of the translated text. Based on the theory of reception aesthetics, this article focuses on the trinity of "author-translator-reader"

and analyzes the culturally-loaded words in "The Wedding Party", to explore how translator Jeremy Tiang accurately conveys the profound meaning of culturally-loaded words, satisfies readers' expectations, improves the readability of the text, and then promotes the cross-cultural dissemination and development of root-seeking novels overseas.

## 2. NOVEL TRANSLATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF RECEPTION AESTHETICS

In the second half of the 20th century, influenced by hermeneutics and phenomenology, the German Kantian school, represented by Jaus and Iser, proposed the theory of reception aesthetics, emphasizing that the meaning of literary works is generated in the reader's reading, highlighting the reader's subjectivity and role, and focusing on the reader's interpretation and aesthetic feelings of the text. [6] At present, Chinese scholars' research on reception aesthetics mainly focuses on the following three aspects: (1) Reader-centered theory. In reception aesthetics theory, it is believed that in the reading process, readers actively understand, interpret, and even create, making them dominant in the "author-translator-reader" trinity relationship. Therefore, translators should adhere to the principle of putting readers at the center and maximizing the readership of the translated text. (2) Summoning structure. Iser once pointed out that "the key to literary works being different from other texts is the existence of uncertainty and gaps in their structure," which "summons" readers to create in the process of interpretation, filling the "gaps" and obtaining reading pleasure. As a bridge between the original work and the readers, the translators should take into account the cognitive gaps of the target language readers and adjust translation strategies appropriately. (3) Expectation Horizon. Starting from the theory of hermeneutics, expectation horizon has been proposed. Due to the influence of historical background, past experience, and fixed thinking patterns, readers have varying aesthetic expectations for their works. Therefore, translators should start from the perspective of the readers, combine their language proficiency and cognitive habits, and flexibly use translation strategies to meet their expectations and perspectives.

## 3. INTRODUCTION TO "THE WEDDING PARTY"

Since its publication in 1985, the novel "钟鼓楼" has been deeply loved by Chinese and foreign readers and won the 2nd Mao Dun Literature Award "The Wedding Party" was published by Amazon Crossing Publishing and sold globally, receiving unanimous praise. On the Goodreads website, known as the "Douban" in the United States, its rating is 3.91, with approximately 31% of readers giving five-star reviews. Most readers rate the "The Wedding Party" as "marvelous, enjoyable, informative, amazing", while others believe that the novel's chapter titles with Chinese characteristics have aroused readers' interest in reading, immersing them in the novel's winding and charming plot, and they become loyal fans of the novel. The widespread popularity of "The Wedding Party" among overseas readers is inseparable from the contribution of translator Jeremy Tiang. Jeremy Tiang was born in Singapore and learned four languages from a young age, namely English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. He has a strong cultural and linguistic foundation, which adds advantages to his Chinese translation work and provides readers with a pure and fluent reading experience. At the same time, Jeremy Tiang is very interested in traditional Chinese culture, has read a large number of literary works by contemporary Chinese writers, and is deeply familiar with Chinese folk culture. At present, he has translated 20 contemporary Chinese literary works into English and has won the PEN Translation Prize. Therefore, he is regarded as one of the most important translators of contemporary Chinese literature.

In short, foreign Sinology translator Jeremy Tiang naturally possesses language advantages, is familiar with the cultural fields of China and the West, can deeply and accurately understand the meaning of culturally-loaded words in specific historical contexts, fill the gap in readers' language cognition, and have an understanding of readers' needs and habits. His translations can deeply reflect on the cultural differences between China and the West, and thus meet readers' aesthetic expectations. This coincides with the core viewpoint of reception aesthetics theory. Given this, based on the theory of reception aesthetics, this article analyses the "The Wedding Party" from the perspective of culturally-loaded words, and explores how translators use translation strategies to cater to readers' expectations and fill the gap in language and culture, providing reference for the overseas

dissemination and promotion of Chinese root-seeking novels.

#### 4. TRANSLATION ANALYSIS OF CULTURALLY-LOADED WORDS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF RECEPTION AESTHETICS

Among various language elements, vocabulary is the most closely related to culture, and culturally-loaded words are an indispensable link. Culturally-loaded words, also known as "lexical gaps", have distinct ethnic characteristics and reflect the unique way of life and customs of this culture. The novel "钟鼓楼" is based on local folk life and inevitably involves many cultural factors, such as material culturally-loaded words related to Beijing buildings and traditional snacks, social folk customs culturally-loaded words related to historical background and customs, and language culturally-loaded words composed of commonly used colloquialisms and idioms in daily communication. These all affect readers' acceptance of the novel to a certain extent. As a result, many culturally-loaded words cannot find corresponding expressions in English, which not only poses obstacles to readers' understanding, but also increases the difficulty of translators' translation. The theory of reception aesthetics advocates a reader-centered approach, guiding translators to approach Chinese culturally-loaded words from the reader's perspective, filling the cognitive gap of overseas readers, improving the readability of the text, and providing practical guidance for the cross-cultural dissemination of root-seeking novels. Therefore, this article will be guided by the theory of reception aesthetics and analyse the translation of culturally-loaded words in the following translation examples one by one.

##### 4.1 *Emphasizing the Subjectivity of Readers and Showcasing the Charm of Folk Novels*

The theory of reception aesthetics highlights the role of readers as the main body of reading activities, and the so-called history of literary is also the history of readers' reception. As Liu Xie pointed out in his book "The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons · Zhi Yin", "An author writes when emotionally stirred. A critic enters into the author's feeling by reading the work." The emotional communication between authors and readers is achieved through the translator's vivid expression. Therefore, translators should adjust

their translation strategies appropriately to meet the expectations of target readers, help readers resonate emotionally with the author, and improve the acceptance of the work.

Example 1: 《钟鼓楼》

Translation: The Wedding Party

The Bell and Drum Tower is located at the northern end of the central axis of Beijing. It is not only an important urban landmark that guards the "Forbidden City", but also the capital time center that "commands the entire city". Generally speaking, it can be translated as the "Bell and Drum Tower". In this way, although it facilitates readers' understanding and perception of this building, it will greatly reduce the readability of the text and even make readers mistakenly think that it is a book about architecture, losing interest in reading. However, in the novel, the meaning of the Bell and Drum Tower goes far beyond that. It is not only the location where the novel's story takes place, but also a symbol of gradually passing time, and is a landmark building that combines time and space into one. Therefore, the translator translated it as "The Wedding Party", highlighting the plot and theme of the novel, allowing readers to imagine a series of things: where the wedding party is held, what the story is, and how it develops. This processing method, from the perspective of readers, satisfies their aesthetic experience, improves their acceptance of the novel text, and is conducive to the dissemination and promotion of root-seeking novels overseas.

Example 2: 卖茶汤、豆腐脑、烤白薯的挑贩早已出动自不必说[1]。

Translation: Vendors of millet paste, tofu pudding, and roasted sweet potatoes were out in force [2].

In addition to the architectural culturally-loaded words mentioned above, there are also a large number of food culturally-loaded words in the novel "钟鼓楼". In Example 2, "茶汤 (chá tāng, millet paste; literally translated as 'tea soup')"<sup>1</sup> is a traditional snack in Beijing, named after being brewed with hot water like tea. However, in the general understanding of the public in foreign countries, tea and soup cannot be regarded as the same thing. Tea is a drink, while soup is food. If translated directly as tea soup, it will cause misunderstandings among foreign readers. In fact,

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1. The translation of these Chinese culturally-loaded words is just suitable for the novel "钟鼓楼".

millet paste is made by using boiling water to dilute the sorghum flour into a thin paste, supplemented by seasonings, such as green and red silk, raisins, and mixed preserved fruit. Therefore, the translator translated it as "millet paste", which is a rice paste mainly made of sorghum rice flour. This way, the image of a steaming bowl of rice paste is vividly displayed on the paper, making it easy for foreign readers to understand and accept Beijing style snacks; For another example, the well-known "豆腐脑 (dòu fu nǎo, bean curd jelly served with sauce)" in China means that a proper amount of lactone is added into the boiled soybean milk as a coagulant, and the boiled soybean milk becomes fresh and delicious bean curd jelly with sauce after standing for 10 minutes. Generally speaking, bean curd jelly served with sauce can be literally translated as "tofu curd". Although it is easy for overseas readers to understand its ingredients and practices, the translation is somewhat stiff and not vivid. In the Chinese and western food culture, pudding is the closest to bean curd jelly with sauce in terms of practice and taste, so the translator translates it as "tofu pudding", which conforms to the western readers' food culture cognition, and foreign readers can resonate in the Chinese and western food culture. At the same time, this translation narrows the distance between readers and the text, which is conducive to showing the unique charm of Chinese folk snacks to the world.

#### 4.2 Using Summoning Structures to Fill Language and Cultural Gaps

Another focus of reception aesthetics theory is the "summoning structure". Iser proposed that "there are uncertainties and blank points in the original text, which is also the fundamental structure of literary texts" [8]. In this way, readers will be influenced by cultural background, understanding level, and other factors when reading, widening the distance from the original work.

Example 3: 在家里头搭“喜棚”宴请“五服”固然做不到，烦“跑海的”到“冷庄子”去订席也力不从心，最后还是决定就在屋里摆三桌自饌菜肴意思意思[1]。

Translation: Of course, there was no way they could set up a wedding pavilion fit to hold five generations of both families, and they didn't feel up to hiring a go-between to organize a banquet at a cold restaurant (that is, one dedicated to weddings and funerals)". In the end, they decided a dinner at home for three tables would do — a token celebration [2].

As a root-seeking novel, "钟鼓楼" encompasses the emotions of Beijing citizens' lives. It is inevitable that a large number of Beijing dialects and colloquial expressions will appear, such as language culturally-loaded words such as "五服 (wǔ fú, five generations of both families)", "跑海的 (pǎo hǎi de, go-between)", and "冷庄子 (lěng zhuāng zi, cold restaurant, that is, one dedicated to weddings and funerals)" in Example 3. Most of them were used in the daily expressions of Beijing citizens in the 1980s, and their frequency in modern Chinese has gradually declined. Even Chinese readers may feel unfamiliar with this due to its long history and obscure vocabulary. Moreover, overseas readers, influenced by linguistic and cultural differences between Chinese and other countries, as well as different historical backgrounds, may experience gaps in semantic cognition, unable to understand the true meaning of the original text, and even misunderstand Chinese folk culture. This requires translators to fill the gap in readers' understanding of foreign languages and cultures through translation, so as to gradually integrate readers' expectations with the original text's perspective, reduce readers' reading barriers, and improve the readership of the translated text.

Specifically, there are at least four interpretations of the term "五服 (wǔ fú)" in classical Chinese culture: unit of measurement, auspicious costumes, inauspicious costumes, and proximity. How to determine the meaning of the "五服 (wǔ fú)" and accurately convey it is a major challenge faced by translators. The translator, based on the story background of the novel - the wedding banquet and the contextual context, infers that "五服 (wǔ fú)" in this context should refer to distant and distant bloodlines. During the wedding banquet, both the male and female sides usually invite relatives and friends within the five costumes to attend the banquet, which is in line with the previous text "喜棚 (xǐ péng, wedding pavilion)". Therefore, it is translated as "five generations of both families", filling the "gap" in the reader's language and cultural perspective with understandable language, and facilitating readers' understanding of Beijing's wedding culture; Generally speaking, most people will understand the term "跑海的 (pǎo hǎi de)" as "venture into business". In this way, overseas readers may misunderstand that Chinese wedding banquets require businessmen to book the banquet, which is a thousand miles from the original meaning. The term "跑海的 (pǎo hǎi de)" originated from the old society and often referred to intermediaries who

helped to contact wedding parties. Therefore, the translator hereby translates it as "go-between", vividly portraying the image of intermediaries rushing back and forth at the wedding banquet, meeting the potential aesthetic expectations of the translated readers; The term "冷庄子 (lěng zhuāng zi)" is derived from the old society, that is, the restaurants in Beijing city can be divided into "冷庄子 (lěng zhuāng zi, cold restaurant)" and "热庄子 (rè zhuāng zi, hot restaurant)". "冷庄子 (lěng zhuāng zi)", as the name suggests, means not receiving

individual guests on ordinary days, but only receiving guests who have pre-booked wedding and funeral banquets. Due to the fact that the stove usually does not light a fire and is cold, it is named "冷庄子 (lěng zhuāng zi, cold restaurant)". The translator adopts literal translation and annotation here, maximizing the preservation of Beijing's folk cultural characteristics and adding a hint of mystery to the root-seeking novels.

Example 4: (see "Figure 1")



Figure 1 Culturally-loaded word-- Year of the Water Dog.

In the novel "钟鼓楼", this illustration can help readers clearly identify the key point that the wedding of Xue Jiyue, the son of the Xue family, will be held on December 12, 1982. The "Year of Renxu in the Lunar Calendar" appearing in the illustrations is completely outside the cognitive range of Western readers. If it is translated as "In the year of Renxu in the lunar calendar", foreign readers will inevitably be confused and fail to understand its true meaning. In Chinese folk culture, the lunar calendar is the current traditional calendar in China, which records the years based on the heavenly stems and earthly branches or Chinese zodiac signs. The year of Ren Xu is one of the sixty years in the calendar of heavenly stems and earthly branches. The heavenly stem is Ren, the earthly branch is Xu, and the five elements of Ren belong to water. Xu is the zodiac dog, hence the year of 1982 can be translated as the year of water dog. In view of this, the translator combined time culturally-loaded words with the Chinese zodiac signs and translated them as "Year of the Water Dog", minimizing readers' reading barriers and exceeding their expectations, reaching the realm of "innovative expectations". Coincidentally, when dealing with specific times, translators also cleverly use Chinese zodiac culture to make the translation more vivid. For example, Maoshi refers to the time from 5 to 7 in the morning, which is also known as sunrise due to the gradual rise of dawn. Considering the uniqueness of the Chinese zodiac culture, the

translator combined the rabbit and hour in the twelve zodiac signs and translated them as "Time of the Jade Rabbit: 5:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m.". Using this form to translate the titles of each chapter is not only neat and coherent, but also corresponds to other titles in the entire text, which can be said to be a clever translation.

### 4.3 Satisfying Readers' Expectations and Achieving Fusion of Horizons

In the context of reception aesthetics, Yao Si pointed out that when readers read novels, they are influenced by previous experiences and thinking patterns, and have expectations for literary works. In the novel "钟鼓楼", there are many social cultural loaded words that may increase the understanding barriers for overseas readers in reading. This requires translators to flexibly use translation strategies to improve the readability of the text, thereby achieving the continuous integration of the author's text perspective and the reader's expectation perspective, in order to achieve the effect of "fusion of perspectives".

Example 5: 夫妻没有隔夜仇，您别操心！

Translation: Don't worry, we never let the sun go down on a fight.

Example 5 is what Tantai Zhizhu said to comfort him and express that she was not angry after arguing with her husband Li Kai when facing

her father-in-law's inquiry. For Chinese readers, it is easy to understand the meaning of "夫妻没有隔夜仇 (fū qī méi yǒu gé yè chóu, couples have no overnight feud)". If translated as "Couples have no overnight feud", it may make Western readers mistakenly believe that Chinese couples do not argue at night, which deviates from the meaning of the proverb itself and leads to misunderstandings. The translator takes into account that when Westerners are angry, they often use the colloquial phrase "never let the sun go down on your anger" to express their anger, that means, do not hold it until sunset. Therefore, the translator used the Western colloquial language and translated it as "we never let the sun go down on a fight". This vividly translated the proverb "夫妻没有隔夜仇 (fū qī méi yǒu gé yè chóu)", awakening the familiarity of Western readers with daily marital arguments and arguments, catering to the targeted expectations of Western readers, and facilitating their understanding and acceptance. To a certain extent, it also allows overseas readers to understand the commonalities between Chinese and Western language and culture, narrow the cultural differences between them, reduce misunderstandings, and promote the exchange and integration of Chinese and Western cultures.

## 5. CONCLUSION

With the increasing popularity of "Chinese literature going global", root-seeking novels, as a vivid literary form, eloquently narrate the changes in traditional Chinese culture and the lives of the general public. The foreign translation of root-seeking novels not only helps to eliminate misunderstandings of Chinese culture among overseas readers and promote diverse exchanges and interactions between Chinese and foreign cultures, but also makes the translation more aesthetic and enhances the influence of the work on the international stage. The theory of reception aesthetics provides a new perspective for novel translation, which is reader-centered. In the translation process, if the translators can deeply understand the cultural information contained in culturally-loaded words, combine the thinking methods and language habits of Chinese and foreign readers, choose appropriate translation strategies, strive to meet the taste preferences of readers, they will be able to bridge cultural differences, and further enhance the aesthetic of the text, thereby creating distinct images of Chinese folk customs and promoting Chinese literature to the world.

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