

# The Translator's Cultural Attitude in the Translation Process

Yanbing Xiong<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan 430070, China

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding author. Email: xiongyanbing@whut.edu.cn

## ABSTRACT

During the translation process, the translator's cultural attitude is a complex and dynamic construct that reflects their cognitive approach to the cultures of the source and target languages. It also involves projecting translators' cultural identity and value judgments, which are shaped by comparing the two cultures. The multidimensional cultural attitude influences translators' motives, selection of translated texts, preferences for translation strategies, paratext selection decisions, and other related elements in the translation process. Their indecision and internal conflict between the source and target languages reveal that the cultural attitude is not a binary choice, but rather a multidimensional, dynamic, and inherently complex construct. Thus, the translator's multidimensional cultural attitude can offer a crucial perspective for understanding and analyzing the intricate translation process.

**Keywords:** Translator, Cultural attitude, Multidimensionality, Translation process.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, as cultural criticism gained prominence in the West, translation research has increasingly moved beyond its earlier linguistic confines, embracing what is now known as the "cultural turn"—a shift that foregrounds the cultural dimensions of translation. Translation is no longer viewed as merely a language conversion activity but a cross-cultural endeavor involving communication and interaction between languages. This, in turn, highlights the significance of culture in the translation process, as well as the translator's subjectivity and creativity. Researchers have increasingly emphasized the translator's role in the translation process, supported by various theoretical discussions and case studies on this topic.

Translators are central to translation activities. They not only skillfully recreate the source text at the linguistic level but also rewrite and manipulate it using various techniques, including text selection, meaning interpretation, specific translation strategies, and the addition of a preface to the translated work (Wang Xiulu, 2014). As both a decision-maker and active participant in the process, the translator's cultural attitude reflects their understanding of the cultures related to both the source and target languages, as well as the

relationship between them, revealing their cultural stance and value judgments. The multidimensional cultural attitude affects translators' motivations, choice of texts, preferred strategies, and other factors throughout the translation process. This paper examines translation practices through the translator's multidimensional cultural attitude, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding and analysis of complex translation activities.

## 2. THE TRANSLATOR'S CULTURAL ATTITUDE AND ITS MULTIDIMENSIONALITY

In 2000, Wang Dongfeng formally introduced the concept of "the translator's cultural attitude" in his article *The Cultural Status of Translated Literature and the Translator's Cultural Attitude* published in the *Chinese Translators Journal*. His work engages critically with Itamar Even-Zohar's Poly-system Theory, which posits that a nation's cultural status significantly influences both the position of translated literature within the broader literary system and the translation strategies adopted by translators. Wang Dongfeng, however, argues that a nation's cultural status is both an objective reality and a subjective interpretation. (Wang Dongfeng, 2000). Realizing the limitations

of the Poly-system theory, Wang shifted his focus from the macro level to the subject— translator, proposing the concept of “the translator’s cultural attitude”—defined as the subjective status that the target culture holds in the translator’s mind (ibid.). He believes that the translator’s cultural attitude involves their perspective and stance regarding both the culture of the source language and the culture of the target language, as well as the interaction between the two during the translation process. This attitude reflects translators’ self-positioning in translational practice and informs both their interpretation of the source text and their choice of translation strategies. The translator’s cultural attitude is inherently complex and continually evolving. It includes a range of stances—such as identification with or critique of the source culture, accommodation to or resistance against the target culture, and ongoing efforts to negotiate a balance between the two.

Wang Xiulu, in 2014, borrowed the term “bifurcation” from the study of national cultural identity, further elaborating on the connotation of the translator’s cultural attitude. He argues that such an attitude encompasses the translator’s perspective on the source language culture, his view of the target language culture, and his attitude towards the relationship between the two cultures, proposing that the translator’s cultural attitude is characterized by “bifurcation”. A translator may often find himself in a complex position when a contradiction or conflict arises between the source language culture and the target language culture. His cultural attitude is not simply affirmative or negative, nor is it always clear-cut. Instead, he constantly wavers and struggles between the two cultures, and this “bifurcated” cultural attitude exerts influence on the translation process at multiple levels (Wang Xiulu, 2014). In short, the translator’s cultural attitude is not merely a simple affirmation or recognition of a particular culture, nor is it a negation or rejection of it. Instead, it represents a multifaceted identity that is dynamically constructed within an “intercultural” space. The translator’s cultural attitude is inherently multidimensional, reflecting complex, varied, and sometimes contradictory perspectives toward both the source and target language cultures. Molded by a confluence of personal experiences, educational background, social context, and deeply held cultural values, this attitude does not remain static but evolves through ongoing intercultural engagement. Far from being a passive influence, it actively guides translators’ choices—determining

which texts are selected for translation, shaping the strategies employed in the process, and ultimately leaving a distinct imprint on the final form of the translated work.

### **3. THE TRANSLATOR’S MULTIDIMENSIONAL CULTURAL ATTITUDE IN THE TRANSLATION PROCESS**

Wang Xiulu (2014) argues that the multidimensional nature of the translator’s cultural attitude manifests in two interrelated ways: on one hand, he harbors profound emotions and identification with his native culture; on the other hand, as a cross-linguistic cultural communicator, he is inevitably inspired and influenced by foreign cultures. The engagement and struggle between the source and target languages thus essentially implies that the translator’s cultural attitude is not always an either/or proposition but rather a multidimensional, dynamically constructed complex. Throughout the translation process, such inherent complexity manifests in various forms, exerting an influence on different aspects of the translation.

#### ***3.1 The Translator’s Cultural Attitude in Text Selection***

The selection of translated texts is the first step in the translation process. According to Wu Sha and Tu Guoyuan (2007), the choice of the source text mainly depends on the dominant ideology of the target language culture. The message conveyed by the translated text is more likely to be accepted by the target language cultural system only if it conforms or largely conforms to the requirements of the target language ideology. Ideology exerts significant influence on the selection of translation materials at a macro level. However, when examining specific translation events, the direct role played by translators in text selection cannot be underestimated (Wang Xiulu, 2014). When selecting materials for translation, translators not only screen and decide which works to translate based on their personal cultural values, aesthetic preferences, and integrated personal interests and preferences, but also consider the acceptability of the target culture and market demand in light of their understanding and expectations of the target culture.

Take Zhou Zuoren as an example. As a prominent translator during the New Culture

Movement in China (1915-1927), Zhou's cultural perspective was profoundly shaped by the social transformations of that era. The texts he chose for translation in this period reveal his distinctive cultural attitude. He concentrated on literature that depicted the experiences of the marginalized and was a leading advocate of humanism during this time. Zhou preferred texts that reflected social reality and encouraged cultural progress, as well as works that could help bring about cultural revival. In the *Collected Works of Foreign Fictions*, a translation co-authored with his brother Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren intentionally avoided works from culturally dominant nations such as Britain, the United States, and France at the time, instead focusing on literary works from oppressed peoples, including those of Russia, Northern Europe, and Eastern Europe. Their goal was to evoke sympathy in Chinese readers for weaker nations and prompt reflections on cultural reforms within China. Notably, Zhou Zuoren's translations encompassed not only classic epics, myths, and dramas in Greek literary history—such as *The Tragedies of Euripides*, *The Comedies of Aristophanes*, and *The Greek Mythological Stories*—but also lesser-known folklores like *The Yellow Rose*, *Sappho*, *Greek Mimes*, and *Aesop's Fables*. His selection of translated texts not only reflects his deep appreciation for the roots of Western culture but is also closely tied to his strong preference for folk culture.

Howard Goldblatt is a distinguished American sinologist and the English translator of Mo Yan, the 2012 Nobel Prize winner in Literature. Having translated over 60 works by more than 30 Chinese authors, Goldblatt is widely regarded as one of the most influential translators of modern Chinese literature into English. His complex and multifaceted cultural attitude, shaped by his unique life experiences and academic background, plays a significant role in his translation practices. Goldblatt has emphasized the importance of selecting appropriate texts for translation. As he notes, "The real challenge isn't translation—it's choosing what to translate. Thousands of novels are published in China each year, and we can only select a handful. A wrong choice would compound misunderstandings. Americans already know too little about China, and misrepresenting its literature only makes things worse" (Ji Jin, 2009). He further asserts that "a wrong choice of text is the gravest mistake—one far more consequential than any translation error" (Meng Xiangchun, 2009).

Advocating a reader-centric translation paradigm, Goldblatt prioritizes "readable, accessible, and even best-selling English" (Goldblatt, 2002). As he puts it, "Above all, I feel accountable to the reader, not the author"—a statement that highlights his sensitivity to target-culture norms and his effort to ensure cultural resonance. Goldblatt challenges the ethnocentric bias that positions Western literature as inherently superior to Chinese writing, calling for a more equitable approach to cross-cultural literary evaluation. Rather than measuring Chinese texts against Western standards, he insists on assessing them within their own cultural context, underscoring the unique value and richness of China's literary heritage. This perspective reveals a nuanced and multidimensional cultural attitude—one shaped by his deep engagement with both Chinese and Western traditions. In practice, his selection of texts reflects a careful balancing act: while he considers the expectations and reading preferences of Western audiences, he remains committed to preserving the core cultural meanings of the original works. Far from being a mere mediator, Goldblatt navigates cultural boundaries with sensitivity and strategic awareness, adapting content without diluting its authenticity. His approach exemplifies not only a profound respect for cultural difference but also a pragmatic understanding of how literature travels across linguistic and cultural divides.

Goldblatt's personal interests also play a significant role in his selection of translated texts, aligning well with his cultural attitude (Ji Jin, 2009). His enthusiasm drives him to choose works that resonate with his passions, often highlighting his appreciation for both Chinese and Western cultures. He states, "I mainly translate the works of my favorite writers". "Sometimes, after reading an exciting work, I feel compelled to translate it into English" (Goldblatt, 2002). A case in point is his decision to translate *Red Sorghum* before *The Garlic Ballads*, even though the latter was the first of Mo Yan's novels he encountered. Goldblatt believed *Red Sorghum* would be the best choice when introducing Mo Yan's works to English-speaking readers. By aligning his personal interests with his text selection, he respects the culture of the source language while also considering the acceptability of the target language's culture.

These examples show that translators' cultural attitudes influence not solely the works they choose to translate but also their understanding and conveyance of the cultural connotations within

those works. The translator's cultural attitude is a crucial factor in translation activities, shaping the diversity and richness of translated works.

### 3.2 The Translator's Cultural Attitude in Translation Strategies Employment

Translation strategy is "a set of principles and solutions employed in translation activities to achieve a specific translation purpose" (Xiong Bing, 2014). According to Wang Dongfeng (2000), the translator's cultural attitude significantly influences both the choice of translation strategy and the socio-pragmatic basis for that choice. The attitude can be shaped by various factors, including translators' personal life experiences, linguistic awareness, understanding, political beliefs, aesthetic preferences, and more. Therefore, studying the translator's cultural attitude helps to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of the translation process and the role that translators play in it.

Scholars generally agree that translators choose between the strategies of domestication and foreignization based on their understanding of both the source and target language cultures. The foreignization strategy emphasizes conveying the source language culture and retains the cultural characteristics and linguistic style of the original text. In contrast, the domestication strategy seeks to align the translation with the target culture by accommodating the readers' expectations, reading habits, and cultural background. However, domestication and foreignization are not absolute opposites; they are rather relative concepts. Regardless of whether translators adopt a domestication or foreignization strategy, such choices represent their acts of cultural mediation undertaken during the translation process. It is precisely the multidimensional nature of the translator's cultural attitude that enables scholars to transcend the binary opposition between domestication and foreignization, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of the coexistence and integration of multiple strategies in practical translation contexts.

For example, Yang Xianyi and his wife, Gladys Yang, exhibited deep fidelity to the source text in their translation of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, achieving exceptional accuracy and a high degree of correspondence with its linguistic and cultural nuances. This is particularly evident in their treatment of the poetry within the novel, where they have largely preserved the formal structure of the

originals—a clear example of a foreignization strategy. Yang Xianyi believed that *A Dream of Red Mansions* possessed deep significance for Chinese culture, and a literal translation was crucial for accurately conveying the richness of China's literary heritage and promoting Chinese culture globally.

However, it is important to note that the Yangs' translation does include instances of domestication. Take their translation of the verse for Baochai and Daiyu from the verse with pictures called "Jinling Prophecies" in Chapter 5: "Alas for her wifely virtue, her wit to sing of willow-down, poor maid! Buried in snow the broken golden hairpin, and hanging in the wood the belt of jade (可叹停机德, 堪怜咏絮才。玉带林中挂, 金簪雪里埋。)" This poem foreshadows the tragic fates of Xue Baochai and Lin Daiyu. The phrase "wifely virtue" (停机德) alludes to the classical story of Le Yangzi's wife cutting the loom thread to encourage her husband's studies, subtly symbolizing Baochai's virtuous and dutiful nature. Yet her virtue ultimately lies "buried in snow", reflecting her cold and lonely fate as a victim of feudal morality. The expression "wit to sing of willow-down" (咏絮才) references the famous story of Xie Daoyun from the Eastern Jin dynasty, who compared falling snowflakes to willow catkins—a metaphor for Daiyu's extraordinary literary talent. Yet her talent is as neglected as a withered tree hanging in the woods, foretelling a tragic end marked by obscurity and abandonment.

In translating "可叹停机德, 堪怜咏絮才", the Yangs employed a domesticating strategy and a free translation approach in the first line, rendering "停机德" as "wifely virtue"—a precise and apt translation that captures the denotative meaning of the term, extolling the feminine virtues of tranquility and propriety. For the second line, by contrast, they utilized a foreignization strategy, translating the literal image to preserve the cultural reference to the poetic talent of "咏絮才". For the lines "Buried in snow the broken golden hairpin, and hanging in the wood the belt of jade (玉带林中挂, 金簪雪里埋)", the Yangs used literal translation throughout, while subtly adjusting the sentence structure and word order to enhance clarity and readability for the English-speaking readers.

Furthermore, when translating Chinese idioms and proverbs, the Yangs often utilized a domesticating strategy, opting for equivalent expressions in English. For instance, the Chinese idiom "画蛇添足" (literally, "drawing a snake and

adding feet”) was translated into the English idiom “gilding the lily”, conveying the same meaning of “an unnecessary or excessive addition”. Clearly, in their translation of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the Yangs have adopted a foreignization strategy to maintain the Chinese cultural specificities present in the source text while also incorporating English cultural elements through the domesticating strategy, thereby catering to the preferences of target-language readers.

### 3.3 The Translator’s Cultural Attitude in Paratextual Elements Handling

Introduced by French scholar Gérard Genette in the 1970s, the concept of paratext refers to the elements surrounding the main body of a text, including peritext, such as titles, prefaces, postscripts, footnotes, illustrations, tables of contents, and cover designs, and epitext, such as interviews, letters, and personal diaries related to the text (Genette, 1997). Paratextual features create a context and provide commentary, thereby expanding the semantic space of the text. Genette’s systematic study of paratext has offered a valuable perspective for translation studies. There is a reciprocal and mutually reinforcing relationship between the translator’s cultural attitude and paratextual elements. On one hand, paratexts supply essential material for understanding the translator’s cultural attitude; on the other hand, the cultural attitude profoundly shapes both the content and form of the paratext itself (Wang Xiulu, 2014). Thus, the paratext in a translation is not merely supplementary—it is a direct reflection of the translator’s cultural attitude.

The translator’s cultural attitudes influence the selection of the paratextual content. When a translator holds a positive attitude toward the source language culture, he is more likely to include extensive explanations and background information about that culture within the paratext, helping readers better grasp the cultural nuances of the original. For instance, Yan Fu added numerous annotations and a detailed preface while translating *Evolution and Ethics*. These paratextual elements not only supplemented and interpreted the source text, demonstrating Yan Fu’s efforts to introduce and systematize Western scholarship, but also revealed his deep reflection on traditional Chinese scholarship (Wang Hui, 2004). His cultural attitude is clearly manifested in the paratext, where he aims to guide readers toward an appreciation of the integration of Chinese and Western thought. The

nuanced cultural attitude enables the paratext to function not only as an interpretive tool but also as a bridge for cross-cultural dialogue, fulfilling Yan Fu’s objective as a translator to use paratextual strategies that connect cultural differences and explore the common ground between Eastern and Western traditions.

The translator’s cultural attitude also influences the style and mode of expression within the paratext. Translators who favor a domestication strategy tend to align the paratext with the cultural norms and rhetorical conventions of the target language. By contrast, those who adopt a foreignizing approach often retain more elements of the source culture within the paratext. In translating *Salome*, Tian Han employed transliteration supplemented by explanatory notes—an example of a foreignizing paratextual strategy that preserved the original text’s exotic essence (Qian Linsen, 2006). He selected the classic illustrations created by British artist Aubrey Beardsley for the title page design of the 1923 standalone edition of *Salome*, published by Zhonghua Book Company. The artist’s name was transliterated into the evocative “*Piya Cilv*” (琵琶词侣). This rendition not only adheres to the phonetic principles of English pronunciation but also incorporates the imagery of “*cilv*” (词侣)—a term from classical Chinese poetry meaning “companions in verse.” Tian’s choice enriches the foreign name with the literary elegance of the Chinese language, avoiding the awkwardness of a purely phonetic transcription.

Furthermore, the translator’s cultural attitude plays a pivotal role in how the paratext engages with readers. Depending on the cultural attitude, translators may choose either direct or indirect strategies to influence the reader’s interpretation of the source text. Ken Liu (2015), the translator of *The Three-Body Problem*, has a unique dual cultural background that combines Chinese and American influences, alongside a diverse academic experience. He prioritizes “cultural integration” in his translation work, and he is committed to bridging the cultural divides between China and the West, thereby enhancing the acceptance of Chinese science fiction among Western audiences. For example, when translating the Chinese computer term “DJS130”, Ken Liu not only provides a clear explanation of the context surrounding this Chinese-made computer in the annotations but also connects it to the familiar “Data General Nova” mainframe computer, known to American readers. Likewise, when introducing Qian Zhongshu, he compares him to the American author Thomas

Pynchon, helping Western readers easily understand Qian's importance in Chinese literature. These paratexts employ an interactive method that "uses what readers know as a bridge" to reduce barriers to understanding, thereby mitigating challenges posed by cultural unfamiliarity.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The translator's cultural attitude is a complex and multidimensional concept within translation studies, which involves how translators navigate the intricate relationship between source and target cultures throughout the translation process. This attitude not only influences translators' selection, interpretation, and representation of the original text but also guides their strategic choices—such as the extent to which they favor domestication or foreignization. The translator's cultural attitude may be shaped by personal aesthetic preferences, values, and cultural identity, as well as by external factors like socio-cultural context, historical circumstances, and ideological influences.

In practice, the translator's cultural attitude is rarely fixed. Instead, it typically involves a dynamic interplay of respect for the source culture, accommodation to the target culture, and a nuanced awareness of—and effort to mediate—the differences between the two. This complexity demands that translators strike a balance between fidelity to the original and accessibility for the target audience, while also navigating choices between preserving cultural specificity and fostering intercultural communication. A close examination of the translator's cultural attitude not only sheds light on the motivations and choices behind a translation and helps explain the final form of the translated text, but also reveals the profound complexity of translation as a practice. More importantly, it clarifies how translation functions as a dynamic medium for conveying meaning across cultures—fostering understanding and co-constructing significance in intercultural encounters. This perspective offers valuable insights for practitioners, researchers, and educators in the field of translation. A nuanced analysis of the translator's cultural attitude not only deepens our understanding of the motivations and decision-making processes underlying translation, as well as the final shape of translated texts, but also offers a more comprehensive appreciation of translation's inherent complexity. More importantly, it shows how translation dynamically conveys and co-creates meaning across cultures by fostering mutual

understanding and shaping shared significance in intercultural encounters. Such insight holds significant implications and value for translation practitioners, scholars, and educators alike.

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