

# The Study of Translation Strategies of Culture-specific Items in Lin Yutang's English Translation of Six Chapters of a Floating Life

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## Abstract

There are numerous translations of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* in various languages, among which Lin Yutang's English translation is the most influential one. Due to the high quality of the translation itself and the special cultural identity of the translator, Lin's translation has a high research value. This paper applies the translation strategy of Culture-specific items proposed by Aixela to analyze the Culture-specific items in Lin's translation of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* in an empirical basis. Based on the results of the empirical analysis, the author further explores the influence factors of Lin Yutang's different translation strategies from both subjective and objective aspects.

## Keywords

*Six Chapters of a Floating Life*; Lin Yutang; Culture-specific Items.

## 1. Introduction

*Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, written by Shen Fu in 1808, is an autobiography that narrates the lives of the author and his wife, Chen Yun, and describes the couple's home life (Wedded Bliss), their hobbies (The Little Pleasures of Life), feudal rituals (Sorrow), and their travels (The Joys of Travel). In the book, readers are impressed by Shen Fu's unstrained and romantic temperament, Yunniang's kind-hearted and humorous natures, as well as the weal and woe they shared with each other. Shen Fu became well-known for recording the ups and downs of his life. "Floating life is like a dream, how long could your happiness last" The book still tells the elusive life across time and space to the world. Today's people can feel the joy and sorrow of the ancients, which is the reason why literature is immortal across the millennia. Lin Yutang was also one of the readers moved by the true feelings in *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, and he once said that "the simple life surrounding mere cotton clothes and homely fare is the most beautiful thing in the universe", he like the couple who led a happy life both in favorable and adverse circumstances. Lin Yutang, with his love for *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* and his mission to introduce Chinese culture to the West, translated *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* into English in 1936 and published it serially in the monthly magazine *T'ien Hsia Monthly*, and later published a Chinese-English book with a long preface. Since then, Oxford University Press published a version of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* translated by Shirley M. Black in 1960, and in the 1980s, Penguin Press published another English translation by Leonard Pratt and Chiang Suhui. In addition to the English translation, *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* has been translated into Japanese, Russian, German, French and other languages. Nevertheless, Lin Yutang is still the first person to translate it, and his translation has made an indelible contribution to the successful dissemination of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* abroad. To date, there have been many studies of Lin's translation. Through an in-depth study of Lin's translation, different perspectives of translation can be explored. Starting from the translation strategy of Culture-specific items proposed by Exila, this paper conducts an empirical study on the translation strategy of Culture-specific items in Lin's translation of *Six Chapters of a*

*Floating Life*, further explores the factors affecting the choice of translation strategy of Culture-specific items, and finally draws a conclusion.

## 2. Culture-specific Items

### 2.1. Classification of Translation Strategies for Culture-specific Items

The concept of Culture-specific items was formally proposed by the Spanish scholar Javier Franco Aixela in 1996, that is, there are no corresponding items in the cultural system of the target language, which causes the difficulties in transferring the functions and meanings of the certain items in source language. Such items are called Culture-specific items, and here are 11 translation strategies for Culture-specific items.

1. Repetition 2. Orthographic adaptation 3. Linguistic (non-cultural) translation) 4. Extratextual gloss 5. Intratextual gloss 6. Synonymy 7. Limited universalization 8. Absolute universalization 9. Naturalization 10. Deletion 11. Autonomous creation (Aixela, 1996:61-64).

Among the above 11 methods, the first 5 are cultural preservations and the last 6 are cultural substitutions.

### 2.2. Culture-specific Items in Six Chapters of a Floating Life

*Six Chapters of a Floating Life* is an autobiography written by Shen Fu in the Qing Dynasty, in which there are traces of classical Chinese. In terms of form, classical Chinese is written restrictedly, with concise expressions and a preference for the four-character structure. In terms of content, classical Chinese makes much use of cultural allusions, idioms, and literary terms. To a certain extent, classical Chinese is more reflective of traditional Chinese history and culture. The content of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* is all-encompassing, covering all aspects of traditional life including traditional customs (food and travel, weddings and funerals, traditional festivals, local customs), geographic features (natural scenery, structural features), interests of life (potted plant art, garden landscape), literary culture (poems and songs, literati) and names (names of people and places, official titles). The book is outlining for the reader colorful scenes of life in the Qing Dynasty. The Culture-specific items in *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* are like a treasure yet to be fully unearthed. The translation of the cultural items in *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* is both a challenge and an opportunity for the translator. What translation strategies does the translator adopt, how does he choose between cultural preservation and cultural substitution, and what cultural attitudes and sentiments such choices reflect? The following study will help us to further understand the translation strategies of Culture-specific items, as well as the translator's identity and methods of overseas communication.

## 3. Empirical Case Studies of Translation Strategies for Culture-specific Items in Six Chapters of a Floating Life

### 3.1. Absolute Universalization

Absolute Universalization refers to the replacement of Culture-specific items with non culture-specific items.

Example 1: 阴Yin and 阳Yang contain the wisdom of ancient Chinese philosophy, revealing the essence of everything and showing the interrelationship of existing things. The dichotomy of Yin and Yang has laid the foundation of logic of Chinese civilization. Because such cultural terms are of certain complexity, translators often use phonetic translation or take only part of their meanings according to the context. When they adopt the latter, the explanatory translation transforms the special words into words of general meaning, which is the absolute generalization method. "Yin and Yang" abstractly can refer to the opposites in every thing. The

specific terms include heaven and earth, sun and moon, day and night, cold and summer, ruler and subject, odd and even, movement and stillness, etc. To correctly understand 阴 Yin and 阳 Yang, we should put them into the context. In the source text “芸曰：‘凡为妇人，已属纯阴，珠乃纯阴之精，用为首饰，阳气全克矣，何贵焉？’” Yun said, “A woman is an incarnation of the female principle, and so are pearls. For a woman to wear pearls would be to leave no room for the male principle. For that reason, I don't prize them. Here, “yin 阴 and yang 阳” have the meaning of male and female, and also contain the meaning of the opposites that run through matter. The translator chose the meaning of “female principle; male principle” in the translation. This translation reduces the rich cultural connotation of the words, but is a relatively appropriate translation in the context.

Example 2: The word “匠气”(Jiang qi) is often used in the evaluation of artistic creation, meaning that the thing described is technical in nature and lacks the artistic flexibility and vividness. In the book, “匠气”(Jiang qi) is used to describe the lack of artistic characteristics of potted plants. “若留枝盘如宝塔，扎枝曲如蚯蚓者，便成匠气矣。”(Trees whose branches are trained in different horizontal circles going up like a pagoda or whose branches turn round like earthworms are incurably vulgar.) The translator translated “匠气”(Jiang qi) into “incurably vulgar”, which is an absolute universalization.

Example 3: “俑罪”(Yong zui) is derived from the Chinese idiom of “creator of a bad precedent”, “俑人”(Yong ren) refers to wooden or ceramic figurines used for burial in ancient times. In the text, Yun proposes a very cruel way to hold the worms in place. “有一法，恐作俑罪过耳” (I know a way, except that I am afraid it would be too cruel), which universalizes the meaning but is consistent with the context.

Example 4: “牲牢”(Sheng lao) is a sacrificial offering of livestock, “牲” refers to the cattle, sheep and pigs for the feast and sacrifice, “牢” is divided into “太牢” including a cattle, a sheep and a pig and “少牢” including a sheep and a pig. The translator translated “牲牢” into sacrificial offering, omitting the meaning of livestock and retaining only the purpose of sacrifice, which is an absolute universalization.

Example 5: The words “于归”(Yu gui) and “出阁”(Chu ge) both express the marriage of a woman, but the word “于归”(Yu gui) means a woman truly returns “home” when she marries into her husband's family. And “出阁”(Chu ge) means being out of the attic since in the ancient time women before the wedding are living in the attic and they can finally come out of the attic upon the wedding. From these two words, we can see the cultural attitudes of people for women getting married at that time, and the translator translates them as generalized meaning (is going to get married).

Example 6: “回煞之期” is an old superstitious expression. It is said that during the dead soul's returning period, the house of the deceased should be retained in the same way as before he died, and the family members should not make any noise, otherwise the soul will stay in the earthly world and cannot be reincarnated. The translator generalized its connotation, directly translating it into “custom”, which is an absolute universalization. The reason is that the author explains in detail the origin and traditional practice of the “returning period” afterwards.

Example 7: “梨园旦角”(Li yuan dan jue), “女伶”(nu ling) are ancient aliases for opera groups and actors. “旦角” refers to performers who play female roles in opera, with specific costumes, makeup and actions. The translation of “an actress on the stage” filters out the trappings of classical opera culture and only conveys the subject and the place, which is concise and easy to understand, but inevitably leads to the loss of cultural connotation.

Example 8: “云烟过眼”(Yun yan guo yan) refers to the passing of things in front of the eyes, which can be extended to mean that the pomp and flashiness of the world are like clouds of smoke. The translation of "as came my way" only extracts the literal meaning of the Culture-specific item, which is clear in terms of semantics, but slightly loses the beauty of subtle sorrow.

Example 9: “堂上”(Tang shang)and“哲嗣”(Zhe si) are old courtesy titles for parents and sons respectively with the difference of status but the translator translates them into “parents” and “son”, which clearly conveys the meaning of the referent and avoids getting into the quagmire of complicated titles, which reflects the translator's simplification of the strict culture of inferiority and superiority in the feudal period.

Example 10: “前车之鉴”(Qian chez hi jian) means to learn the lesson of the car that overturned in front of you, and metaphorically to learn from experience after failure. It is translated into “Mine is a case in point”, omitting the cultural connotation of “前车之鉴”, with a more natural and concise expression.

### 3.2. Intratextual Gloss

The Intratextual gloss method refers to the explanation within the translation in order not to disturb the overall text.

Example 1: “射覆”(She Fu) is a Chinese folk game of guessing objects, which originated in the Han Dynasty, in which the guessed objects were placed in 瓿ou and 盂yu (containers) for people to guess. In the text, it is a kind of drinking activity to cheer people up. The translator translated it into “literary games in which the loser had to drink”. The translator does not translate the full meaning, but only a content introduction. The necessary additions are made for explanation according to the needs of the context, which is conducive to the coherence of the text as a whole.

Example 2: “合卺”(He jin) refers to the ceremony of marriage. “卺”(Jin) refers to the ladle that holds the wine. It is translated into “drinking of the customary twin cups between bride and groom”, leaving out the imagery of the ladle. This is an effective way to supplement the information.

Example 3: 一手挽红丝,一手携杖悬姻缘簿

It was a picture of the Old Man holding, in one hand, a red silk thread [for the purpose of binding together the hearts of all couples] and in the other, a walking-stick with the Book of Matrimony suspended from it.

This is a description of the portrait of the Lunarian. Both the 红丝(red silk thread) and 姻缘簿(the Book of Matrimony) are Culture-specific items, and “red silk thread” is far from being able to convey the cultural meaning, so the translator adds the use of “red silk tread” [for the purpose of binding together the hearts of all couples].

### 3.3. Repetition

Repetition resembles literal translation. The repetition method is used for many Culture-specific items in the text, such as 国忌(national mourning); “走月亮”(pacing the moonlight); 亲同形影(clung to each other like an object and its shadow 拔山倒树 overturning my hills and tearing up forest. The use of repetition can convey the imagery and rhetoric used in the source text in a more complete way, allowing the reader to experience the "original sense" of the scene. The use of repetition also expresses the translator's attitude of respecting the original appearance of some stable things in the culture. In the translation of the place names, the repetition is used more frequently, for example, 爱莲居 Lover's Lodge 西湖 West Lake 宾香阁 Tower of My Guest's Fragrance 金母桥 The east of Mother Gold's Bridge 水仙庙 Narcissus

Temple 虎啸桥 Tiger's Roar Bridge 万年桥 Bridge of ten Thousand Years 千顷云 A Thousand Acres of Clouds; 水月居 (Moon-in-the-Water Lodge) 桂轩 (The Cassia Studio); 香雪海 (The Sea of Fragrant Snow); 大观亭 (Majestic View Pavilion); 紫藤红树山房 (The Mountain Hut of Wistarias and Red Trees); 无忧亭 (Carefree Pavilion)

In addition, repetition is also used in the translation of food: 麻饼 (sesame-seed cake); 鲜菱雪藕 (fresh lotus roots and water caltrops); 绣货及苏酒醉蟹 (embroidered goods, Soochow wine and wine-treated crabs); 素面 (vegetarian noodles); 焦饭 (dried rice); 干饭 (dry cooked rice); 盐菜 (salted vegetables);

However, the disadvantage of the repetition is the difficulty in overcoming the "cultural chasm". For example, the translator's translated "卿将效笠翁之"怜香伴"" into "Are you going to enact the comedy Lianhsiangpan of Li Liweng right in our home?" If no annotation is added, the English reader will feel confused with "Lianhsiangpan". And "兼之玉碎香埋" is translated into "like broken jade and buried incense". Although the imagery of "jade" and "incense" are preserved intact, the connotations of "jade" and "incense" in two languages are somewhat different. In Chinese, jade has the meaning of beauty and whiteness, and incense can be used to describe women's things. Therefore, Shen Fu used the phrase "broken jade and buried incense" to describe the death of his wife, expressing his grief over the death of a beautiful person.

Another example is "五云多处" (Where the Five-colored Clouds Are Abundant). The 五云 (five-colored clouds) contain green, white, red, black, and yellow, and the ancients used the cloud colors to pray for good fortune and avoid bad luck. Later, it is also mostly used as an auspicious omen, which reflects people's good wishes for good luck and auspiciousness. The translation of 五云 five-colored clouds respects the content of the source text but omits the cultural characteristics and connotations carried by five clouds;

The third example is that 跨鹤腾空 (Quick as riding upon a stork in the air). In Chinese culture, driving a crane has the meaning of attaining "Tao", and ascending to heaven after death, which is however not explained in the translation. In the translation, the mythological sense of the crane is somewhat missed.

### 3.4. Deletion

Example 1: 枝忌对节如肩臂, 节忌臃肿如鹤膝

It is against good taste to have swollen joints at these bends, or to have two branches growing directly opposite each other.

In the original, the metaphorical meanings of "如肩臂" (like shoulders and arms) and "如鹤膝" (like cranes' knees) are omitted in the translation.

Example 2: 触我春愁偏婉转, 撩他离绪更缠绵

They softly touch the spring sorrow in my bosom, and gently stir the longings in her heart.

In the source text, the words "偏婉转" (winding and mild) and "更缠绵" (more entangled) are emotionally oriented words. Sentimental and abstract beauty in the source text cannot be fully conveyed in the translation so the translator has omitted them.

Example 3: 姊何心春乃尔耶?

Why is Sister's heart palpitating like that?

The word "心春" refers to a heartbeat as fast as something being pounded in a stone mortar or bowl.

Example 4: 一灯如豆, 罗帐低垂, 弓影杯蛇, 惊魂未定

The light of a rapeseed oil lamp was then burning as small as a pea, and the edges of the bed curtain hung low in the twilight, and we were shaking all over.

“弓影杯蛇”(mistake the shadow of a bow in one's cup as a snake—a false alarm) is omitted by the translator who wants to convey this meaning through other words and phrases.

From the above translation strategies, we can see that Lin Yutang uses more cultural substitution (absolute universalization, deletion) than cultural preservation (repetition, orthographic adaptation, and intratextual gloss). Lin Yutang tries to preserve the specific denotation of the cultural items, but in specific situations where the preservation of cultural imagery is not conducive to the readability and coherence of the overall translation, the translator tends to preserve only the connotation and omit the denotation.

## 4. Factors Influencing the Choice of Translation Strategies for Culture-specific Items

### 4.1. Objective Factors: Cultural Default

Wang Dongfeng put forward the concept of cultural default, stating that in the process of communication, both parties should have common background knowledge or pragmatic prerequisites in order to achieve the desired communicative purpose. In this case, things that are self-evident to both parties can be omitted to improve the efficiency of communication. The cultural default is the omission related to the cultural context outside the discourse (Wang Dongfeng, 1997).

This cultural default is particularly evident in the translation of the works written in ancient Chinese, where traditional imagery, idiomatic expressions and cultural allusions can have multiple meanings in Chinese writing, and the Chinese reader can understand multiple layers of meaning without clear explanation. However, for English readers, these cultural connotations are difficult to be understood at once if these defaults are not made explicit, thus creating a temporary or permanent semantic vacuum. However, if the omissions are expressed explicitly in the translation, they may cause redundancy and the coherence of the reading will be drastically reduced. In addition, ancient Chinese has richer cultural connotations than modern Chinese but is more concise and condensed in form, so cultural omissions are more common in ancient Chinese. In the translation of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, the translator inevitably encounters the problem of cultural default, which is caused by the cultural gap between the Chinese and English languages, and in an objective sense, it also reflects the untranslatability of the text to a certain degree, i.e., the difficulty of finding a completely equivalent expression between the target language and the source language. To blaze a translatable rail among the thorny bushes of untranslatability, the translator as a reader of the source language needs to re-examine the culture behind the language, fully understand and faithfully transmit the content of the original text; in the meanwhile, it is also necessary for the translator to re-act as the author to appropriately adjust the language transfer according to the translation purpose and the cultural background of the audience, and effectively compensate for the cultural default. However, it is important to realize that even if the compensation strategy is effective, it cannot fully compensate for the loss of cultural information caused by cultural default. In his translation of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, Lin Yutang downplays and ignores many of the cultural defaults that do not have a direct impact on the understanding of the text, while interpreting and supplementing some cultural defaults that are useful, interesting, or deemed necessary to convey. However, although Lin Yutang adopts different translation or compensatory strategies according to different needs, in the end, he can only compensate for the missing information to a greater or lesser extent, but cannot completely bridge the cultural gap, and the fact that cultural defaults objectively exist remains unchanged. The existence of cultural default helps to further understand the

difficulty of translating Culture-specific items and the expected gap in the effectiveness of the translation strategies.

#### 4.2. Lin Yutang's Cultural Identity and Cultural Attitudes

Lin Yutang has a rare bilingual cultural awareness of the commonalities between Chinese and Western cultures. In his works, readers can appreciate his distinctive cross-cultural dialogue, learn foreign cultures and customs, and re-examine the strengths and shortcomings of Chinese culture. Before Lin Yutang begins to introduce Chinese people in *My Country and My People*, he quotes a passage from Western history and culture to present as a starter: "But when it comes to the study of a whole country, the ordinary people must not be ignored. The people of ancient Greece were not all Sophocle, and the seeds of Bacon and Shakespeare could not be spread everywhere in Elizabethan England"(Lin Yutang,1994). The purpose of this writing is to enable Western readers, who know little about Chinese culture, to "connect the dots" and become interested in understanding Chinese culture. For example, when introducing the gap between the North and the South in China, Lin Yutang draws an analogy between European culture and Chinese culture to make it easier for Western readers to enter this unfamiliar world: "The people of Southern China are different from the people of the North in their temperament, physique, and habits, just as the inhabitants of the Mediterranean coast of Europe are different from the Norman people" (Lin Yutang,1994). Lin Yutang's unique cultural identity equipped him with a new vision of surveying Chinese and Western cultures, and he incorporated this open-minded thinking into his translations.

In translating *The Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, Lin Yutang employs more substitutions than preservations. This reflects Lin Yutang's skill in using cross-cultural approaches to find the best way to clarify cultural differences, which is also the reason why his translation of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* does not show any stereotypical translation traces, but rather shows the flexibility of language. This is also the reason why his translation of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* does not show traces of rigidity, but shows the flexibility of language.

But as everything exists in opposition, Lin Yutang's diaspora identity also kept him at a certain distance from traditional Chinese culture. The term "diaspora" originally referred to the Jews who were expelled from Jerusalem by the Romans (Schnapper, 1999). Today, it refers primarily to "a group of people scattered in a foreign land"(Connor 1986). Although born and raised in China, his cultural consciousness has long been influenced by Western civilization. Born into a Christian family, his family education was always centered on the Bible and ancient Greek legends. His schooling let him acquire a deeper understanding of Western culture. He studied in the United States and Germany, and received an M.A. from Harvard University and a Ph.D. in linguistics from the University of Leipzig. He was also one of the very few Chinese who received Western higher education at that time. Although his years of study and life abroad gave Lin Yutang a distinctive cultural perspective, he also experienced cultural amnesia from time to time as he spent long hours away from his native culture. He felt ashamed to say that he knew the story of Joshua blowing down the city of Jericho in the Old Testament at a very early age, but he did not hear the legend of Meng Jiangnu crying to overturn the Great Wall until he was thirty. "The identity of translators with diaspora experience is always characterized by multiplicity and complexity. Identity should not be seen as a given fact, instead, it should be seen as a process of "production", which is dynamic and always formed internally rather than externally" (Stuart, 1994).In the translation of *The Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, Lin Yutang tends to adopt a generalized and naturalized approach to translate Culture-specific items, inevitably losing the specific imagery, traditional connotations and rich emotions of the Culture-specific items themselves. In this sense, the cultural treasures hidden in *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* are more or less lost in the process of interlingual translation.

The translation of Culture-specific items is not only influenced by the translator's complex cultural identity, but also related to the translator's personal understanding and attitudes of the original text. *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* is an autobiographical novel that records the experiences of Shen Fu and his wife, Chen Yun who share the sorrows and joys in their life. In terms of the choice of the work, Lin Yutang did not choose works on revolutionary themes required by the times, but rather chose a literary autobiography, which reflects Lin Yutang's desire to find a peaceful and quiet spiritual land for himself in these times of war and chaos. It was in the process of translating with full attention that he could regain his attachment to the national culture and his confidence in the future of the nation. Lin Yutang himself once expressed his love for *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, writing in the translator's preface, "Reading Shen Fu's book made me feel the wonders of this peace, far beyond the oppression of the earthly and the pain of the human - a peace, I think, very much like the peace of mind of an innocent man in prison, which is what Tolstoy subtly expresses in *Resurrection*. It is the mind that has overcome the body. For this reason, I think the life of this couple is the most tragic but meanwhile the most lively and happy - it is the joy in the face of trouble." Lin Yutang translated in detail the Culture-specific items with narrative effect or key connotations, and made additions and explanations using intratextual gloss, so that foreign readers could feel the emotions experienced by the readers of the source language as much as possible. Lin also makes the whole story coherent and fluent, complete and natural, instead of being intermittent and far-fetched. Lin's translation is still the most widely spread one, partly because of the translator's emotional commitment and love for the source text, which makes the translation as genuine as the original. In addition, Lin Yutang's emotional attitude toward the characters also influenced the translation strategy he adopted. Lin Yutang said, "Yun, I think, is the loveliest woman in Chinese literature" "She could see the beautiful things in the world of life, the things that the ancient Chinese women sticking to the propriety had never seen" Lin Yutang was very sympathetic to Yun's suffering. He said with indignation: "The reason for this tragedy is that Yun knew how to read and write, and she loved beauty and she did not know what was the sin of loving beauty." His sympathy for Yun and his dissatisfaction with the oppression and discrimination against women in ancient society indirectly influenced his translation of some old customary specific items, such as the items about women's marriage and the strict requirements for daughters-in-law, which Lin Yutang downplayed and passed over without detailed explanation. It also reflected his cultural attitude toward them.

## 5. Conclusion

The special cultural connotations carried by Culture-specific items is a major difficulty in translation. The 11 translation strategies of Culture-specific items proposed by Exila are the main translation strategies adopted by many translators intentionally or unintentionally. In Lin Yutang's translation of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, through extensive empirical analysis the author found that the translators used more cultural substitutions than cultural preservations, and more retentions of the connotative meaning of the specific item than its denotative meaning. The translation strategies adopted by the translators to deal with the Culture-specific items not only objectively reflect the inevitable cultural default phenomenon in cross-cultural communications, but also reflect the translators' own cultural identities and cultural attitudes. Because of Lin Yutang's own cultural bilingualism and diaspora identity, he uses translation methods that are easily accepted by the readers of the translated language in his translation, which reflects his aspiration for his cultural mission and attitude of actively introducing Chinese culture to foreign countries.

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