



# A Study on the Translation Strategies of Culture-loaded Words in *Frog* from the Perspective of Domestication and Foreignization

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**Abstract:** Culture-loaded words are words, phrases and idioms that signify things unique to a certain culture, and these terms reflect the unique ways of activity of a particular people that have been gradually accumulated over a long period of history and that are different from those of other peoples. Domestication and foreignization are two different translation strategies; domestication is to get as close as possible to the reader and the target language culture, while foreignization is to get as close as possible to the author and the source language culture. This paper analyses the culture-loaded words in Mo Yan's literary work *Frog* from the perspectives of foreignization and domestication, and explores the translation strategies and reasons behind the choice. In this thesis, the culture-loaded words in *Frog* are analyzed and discussed separately according to Nida's classification of culture, including religious, linguistic, social and material culture-loaded words. It is found that translators flexibly use foreignization and domestication when dealing with different culture-loaded words, with foreignization as the majority and domestication as the minority. Through the study on the translation of culture-loaded words, this paper explores deeply the way in which the translator of *Frog* presents Chinese culture to the world, providing a powerful reference for the translation of other Chinese local literature, and offering new ideas for the transmission of Chinese culture.

**Keywords:** domestication, foreignization; *Frog*, Mo Yan

## 1. Introduction

Mo Yan, born in 1955 in Weifang, Shandong Province, is a representative writer of contemporary Chinese literature, author of *Big breasts and wide hips*, *The Republic of Wine*, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, *Sandalwood Death*, etc. In August 2011, Mo Yan won the Mao Dun Literature Prize for his work *Frog* and in October 2012 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, becoming the first Chinese writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

In the Western translation field, Howard Goldblatt is one of the most prolific translators of Mo Yan's works, whose translations text include *Red Sorghum*, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, and so on. He is known as "the chief translator of modern and contemporary Chinese literature" and "the midwife of Chinese literature in the Western world". 2014, Howard Goldblatt 's English translation of *Frog* was released and received a fierce response from readers in English-speaking countries. "Chinese cultural loaded words are the concentrated manifestation of traditional Chinese culture, which is the most central form of external expression of traditional culture." [1] The use of the two translation strategies of domestication and foreignization in dealing with cultural load words in the English translation of *Frog* has a profound reference significance for promoting the strategy of Chinese culture going out and constructing China's outward discourse system, which has certain research value and reference significance. As Mo Yan said, "The world needs to observe China through literature, and China needs to show its true image through literature." [2] Therefore, under the theory of domestication and foreignization, the research aims to discuss the following two questions: First, in the process of translation different culture-loaded words in *Frog*, the translator, Howard Goldblatt, used what kinds of translation strategies. Second, what's the reason behind the choice of translation strategies?

## 2. Linguistic Culture-loaded Words

Culture-loaded words that can reflect features of language are called linguistic culture-loaded words. A large part of the linguistic cultural-loaded words are various idioms, vocabularies, dialects and so on, which have been formed by Chinese society in a long period of time. As two completely different languages, Chinese and English are not only different in language form, but also different in cultural connotation inside the language. The study shows that the translator tends to use foreignization strategy for the translation of linguistic culture-loaded words, including literal translation, literal translation plus liberal translation.

Example 1

ST: 许司令说了, 用八人大轿抬不来, 就用绳子给老子捆来, 先礼后兵, 老子摆大宴请他!

TT: Command Xu said if an eight-man sedan chair won't do the trick, he'd hogtie him and take him under escort to a banquet in his honour.

“八人大轿” is the same with “八抬大轿”. it firstly comes from Peng Gong Case (彭公案) in the Qing Dynasty: “this time, my lord go out of the capital by the eight-carried sedan chair, more glory than ever before.(大人这次出京, 坐的八抬大轿, 比先前更显荣耀。)” Sedan chair has a long history in China, the ancient Chinese feudal society has a strict hierarchy on the sedan chair: the higher the official rank, the more people carrying the sedan chair. Nowadays, people often use “八人大轿” or “八抬大轿” to indicate that the invitation is sincere and the ceremony is grand. The translator here adopts a foreignization strategy, translating the word directly and retaining the image of the culture-loaded word. To the reader, even in the face of such a cultural gap, according to the image of “eight men carrying a sedan chair” and the contextual connection, they can understand that Commander Xu really admires Grandpa's reputation in medical technology and wish Grandpa to stay for the medical industry of Jiaodong.

Example 2

ST: 姑姑看到炕上的情景就感到怒不可遏, 用她自己的话说, 叫作“火冒三丈”。

TT: Gugu witnessed the scene the moment she walked in, and was livid with anger; in her own words, “the flames were thirty feet high”.

The Chinese often use the phrase “火冒三丈” to express extreme anger. In dealing with the phrase “火冒三丈”, the translator has converted the Chinese unit of measurement “丈” to “尺”, which means that three Zhang (丈) is equal to thirty feet. But the imagery of the word, fire or flame, is still retained. In addition, readers can understand that the flame here is a metaphor for the aunt's anger at the old way of delivering babies, rather than a real flame, through the word “angers” in the context. By using the foreignization as a majority and domestication as a minority, the translator has kept the characteristics of the original text and conveyed the meaning of the idiom to the readers in a graphic and accurate way, thus avoiding reading difficulties.

### 3. Religious Culture-loaded Words

Religion has a profound influence on Chinese culture. Since ancient times, religions such as Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism have been introduced or developed in China and deeply integrated into the local culture. Religious teachings and values have shaped Chinese morals and codes of conduct and influenced social ethics and family values. religious culture-loaded words refer to those that are related to characters or stories of a certain religion. The ensuing religious culture-loaded words have also been integrated into Chinese literature. Religious factors in Chinese literary works are usually richer and more complex, and this complexity of beliefs, however, serves as an aesthetic glue for the creation of literature [3]. When the translator deals with religious culture-loaded words, they should take into full consideration the acceptability of oriental religious words in the target culture, and also consider whether the heterogeneity of the words should be preserved. The research finds that the translator works to consider the balance between the origin of Chinese cultures and the readability of readers. Thus, he uses many compromised methods to keep the balance, including transliteration, literal translation and so on. However, the foreignization strategy continues to maintain the majority.

Example 4

ST:那时候, 我是活菩萨, 我是送子娘娘。

TT: I was a living Buddha back then, the local stork.

The translator has also taken into account the translation strategies of domestication and foreignization in translating Example 4. From the viewpoint of domestication, the translator has translated the term “送子娘娘” in the original text into a more familiar and easy-to-understand concept for English readers-- “local stork”. The word “stork” originally refers to a kind of bird, which is believed by Western people to bring children, and this symbolism coincides with that of “送子娘娘” in Chinese Buddhist culture. The translation strategy of domestication aims to make it easier for target language readers to understand the cultural concepts in the original text, to reduce the cultural gap and to enhance cross-cultural communication. From the perspective of foreignization, the translation of “活菩萨” into “living Buddha” is a more symbolic and culturally distinctive way of expression. This foreignization strategy emphasizes the uniqueness and richness of the culture of the source language, which makes the translation more poetic and culturally meaningful, but at the same time may make it more difficult for readers of the target language to understand. The translation of Example 4 contains both domestication and foreignization efforts to make the cultural concepts more comprehensible and to preserve the cultural characteristics and mood of the original text.

Example 5

ST:姑姑冷笑道: 孙悟空本事再大, 也逃不出如来佛的掌心!

TT: Gugu sneered. Even the magical monkey Sun Wukong could not escape from the Buddha's palm.

Sun Wukong (later to become the Wining Buddha) and Tathagata Buddha are both famous Buddhist figures in China. For the religious culture-loaded word “孙悟空”, the translation chooses to be literal translated as “Sun Wukong” and retains the name in the original text, which is a kind of foreignizing translation strategy. This helps to maintain the uniqueness and traditional meaning of the characters in the original text, makes it easier for readers to associate them with the famous image of Sun Wukong in Chinese culture, and enhances the cultural communication of the text. For the religious culture-loaded word “如来佛”, the translation was simplified to “Buddha” instead of the more detailed “Tathagata Buddha”. This choice of translation is a domestication strategy, as “Buddha” is more common and familiar in English and easier to understand by the target audience. Although “Buddha” does not correspond directly to “如来佛” in the original text, this domestication translation choice helps to reduce cultural barriers and make the translation more readable and fluid. The translator adopts different translation strategies for the two religious-culture-loaded words in Example 5. This flexible translation technique is worth learning from.

#### 4. Material Culture-loaded Words

The Chinese people have their own unique way of life and means of production, which has given rise to a unique Chinese material culture. Especially in the rural setting of *Frog*, there are artefacts or tools that demonstrate the uniqueness of China in terms of clothing, food, housing and transport, which forms material culture-loaded words. These objects and tools are not only the necessities of life, but also carry rich cultural connotations and historical memories, demonstrating the Chinese people's traditional way of life. These objects and tools add a unique charm and flavor to Chinese material culture. For the translation of material culture-loaded words, the translator mostly chooses domestication strategy, such as liberal translation, paraphrase and so on.

##### Example 7

ST: 用筷子不得劲，索性用上了“皮笊篱”，大把抓着网嘴里塞。

TT: His pointed chopsticks were hard to use, so I dug in with my meat hooks, cramming food into my mouth.

“皮笊篱” is a utensil made of leather, unlike the traditional strainer which is usually made of woven rattan or wire. The characteristic of the “皮笊篱” is that it does not leak, so it can be used to catch all the water, like there is no leakage of soup. From the point of view of domestication and foreignization theory, the translation of “皮笊篱” into “meat hooks” is a kind of domestication translation, which aims to make it easier for English readers to understand the shape and function of the tools described in the original text. Through the translated text, “meat hooks”, readers can more easily imagine a tool used to catch food, and then understand the scene that Gugu is gobbling, which helps readers better understand the meaning and context of the original text. This domestication translation allows the function and appearance of the tool to jump out in front of target readers, and also allows the reader to further experience the plot of the whole book, thus enabling communication between the original text and the reader. Therefore, although this domestication translation weakens the cultural aspect to some extent, it helps the reader to read and understand the original text better.

##### Example 8

ST:…身着七十年代大流行的“的确良”军干服，衣袖高挽…

TT: She was wearing a 1970s-vintage Dacron military uniform, sleeves rolled up.

In Example 8, the translator adopts the strategy of domestication when translating “的确良军干服”. In the original text, “的确良军干服” is a kind of clothing with specific historical background and cultural connotation during the period of China's reform and opening up, which represents a specific style of Chinese society at that time. The translator's translation of “的确良军干服” into Dacron, a polyester fiber brand well known in the Western world, may be intended to make it easier for Western readers to understand the material and characteristics of this kind of clothing. It will help readers better understand the clothing described in the original text. Employing the translation strategy of domestication, the translator aims to convert the cultural elements of the original text into expressions that are more intuitive and comprehensible for the target language audience. This approach ensures a smoother transmission of the original text's meaning and context, facilitating a deeper understanding of culture-loaded words and alleviating any potential reading challenges presented by the source material. In the original text of *Frog*, there are many objects from a special period of Chinese history, which can show the humanistic and material culture of a particular period in the background of the story, and the translator will transfer them to a certain extent without affecting the plot of the storyline so as to make them more suitable to the cultural background of the target language readers.

## 5. Social Culture-loaded Words

“Social culture-loaded words involve vocabulary in terms of interpersonal communication, lifestyles and social relations. They are spawned from socio-cultural contexts.” [4] Translators should have an in-depth understanding of the socio-cultural contexts of the source language and the target language, and make flexible use of translation methods, such as direct translation, annotation, or paraphrasing, in order to ensure that the translated text is close to the original meaning and conforms to the target readers’ socio-cultural contexts, and to bridge the gap between the two socio-cultures. When the translator meets social culture-loaded words, the domestication strategy is preferred.

### Example 10

ST: 因为乡间有俚语曰: 先出腿, 讨债鬼。

TT: There’s a popular saying in the countryside that goes: If a leg is foremost, then you owe a ghost.

“先出腿, 讨债鬼” is a Chinese folk superstition. People believe that if the mother gives birth to a child and the child’s legs come out first, then it means that the family owes debt in a previous life, and the child is reincarnated to collect the debt. China’s rural society has a lot of superstitious culture, which either comes from certain natural phenomena or comes from oral traditions. From the perspective of domestication and foreignization theory, the translation of “先出腿, 讨债鬼” reflects a domestication translation strategy. On the one hand, when translating this sociocultural loaded word, the translator will add words such as “if” and “then” to reveal the implicit logic, making the translation easier to understand and in line with the reading habits of the target language readers. On the other hand, translators are not restricted by the structure of the original text. The complete structure of the word “讨债鬼” in the second half of the original text should be “这个婴儿是讨债鬼”. As a bridge of communication, translators are bound to convey complete information in the process of translation, but the complete structure is too redundant and complex. Therefore, the translator changed the subject and translated it to “you owe a ghost”, in which “ghost” and “owe” together construct the image of “debt-collection ghost”, which not only retains the correct meaning of the original text, but also avoids the unappropriated complicated translation.

### Example 11

ST: 姑姑生于公历1937年6月13日, 农历五月初五, 乳名端阳, 学名万心。

TT: She was born on 13 June 1937, the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, which is Duanyang, the day of the Dragon Boat Festival. They called her Duanyang until she started school, and was then called Wan Xin (Heart).

In Example 11, there are several culture-loaded words about society. The original text mentions that my aunt was born on the fifth day of the fifth month in the Solar Calendar, so her baby-name is Duanyang. Chinese readers can easily understand the reason of the baby-name, which is the aunt was born on the Dragon Boat Festival (Duanyang). However, due to the lack of relevant cultural background, readers of the target language may question the correlation between Duanyang and the fifth day of the fifth month in the Solar Calendar. Therefore, the translator adopted a domestication strategy to explain the Dragon Boat Festival, so that readers can better understand the cultural background. “乳名” represents the nickname before entering school, and “学名” is the nickname after entering school, these two names are the unique name culture of Chinese society. In the translation, the translator cleverly used “until she started school” to distinguish the two names, and explained it to the reader in the most concise way.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study delves into the translation techniques employed for linguistic, religious, social, and material culture-loaded words in the novel *Frog*. It does so through the lens of the domestication and foreignization theory, aiming to offer valuable insights and experiences that can inform the translation of culture-loaded words in diverse literary works. Howard Goldblatt flexibly uses two translation strategies, domestication and foreignization, in his translation of *Frog*, and he believes that translation is betrayal and rewriting, but faithfulness is always the first criterion of Howard Goldblatt’s translation practice. [5] On the premise of being faithful to the original text, the translator lowers the reading threshold as much as possible, so that Western readers can feel the real and vivid Chinese literature. Modern Chinese literature has emerged on the international literary scene in recent years, whether it is native-soil literature such as Mo Yan’s *Frog* and *Republic of Wine*, or science-fiction literature such as Liu Cixin’s *The Three Body Problem*, all of which are widely loved around the world. Although Chinese culture has already gone out, and cultural soft power is gradually showing its unique power in international communications, it does not match with China’s current hard power such as economy and military, and still needs to be improved [6]. Under the background of “culture going out”, it is responsible for translators of Chinese literature to think about if they can translate these works well and present Chinese culture to the world.

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