



A Comparative Study on the English Translation of *Teahouse* from the Perspectives of Domestication and Foreignization

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Abstract: This paper conducts a comparative analysis of two English translations of Lao She's play *Teahouse* — by Ying Ruocheng (1999) and John Howard-Gibbon (1980) — employing Lawrence Venuti's theories of domestication and foreignization [1]. The study examines their respective approaches to rendering Beijing dialect and culture-loaded items, exploring the translators' strategic choices between "cultural adaptation" and "cultural transmission." The findings indicate that Ying Ruocheng's translation exhibits a distinct tendency towards domestication. He utilizes strategies such as idiomatic substitution and figurative adaptation to facilitate smooth comprehension for the target audience, thereby effectively conveying the play's dramatic effect and socio-critical themes. In contrast, Howard's version adopts a foreignization strategy [2], primarily through literal translation, image retention, and intra-textual explanation. This approach aims to preserve the cultural authenticity of the original work, presenting readers with a portrayal that closely mirrors the source context. The differing degrees of domestication and foreignization in the two translations stem from the translators' distinct identities, target objectives, and their respective socio-historical contexts. Neither strategy is inherently superior; both represent legitimate methodological choices dictated by different communicative needs. The interplay of these strategies endows the English versions of *Teahouse* with enduring artistic vitality and broader communicative influence. This study concludes that literary translation should seek a balance between domestication and foreignization, leveraging culture as a bridge for meaningful cross-cultural dialogue.

Keywords: domestication; foreignization; English translation of *Teahouse*; culture-loaded items; cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

Lao She's *Teahouse* is a classic of modern Chinese drama, renowned for its profound social insight, vivid characterization, and distinctive "Beijing-flavored" language. However, the very elements that constitute its local color — such as its cultural specificities, historical context, and social ethos — pose significant challenges in translation, often resulting in perceived foreignness in the target-language text. Consequently, the translation of such a work demands careful contextual sensitivity. Among the various English translations, Ying Ruocheng's version (officially published in 1999) and Howard's version (produced in the 1980s) stand out due to their distinctive styles and wide dissemination, making them exemplary cases for studying the cross-cultural journey of *Teahouse*. Their divergent approaches and the translators' strategies correlate with the respective characteristics of the translations, thus facilitating a productive comparative analysis. Lawrence Venuti's framework of domestication and foreignization provides a critical lens for this investigation [1]. A domestication strategy minimizes the foreignness of the source text to align with the normative expressions of the target culture, whereas foreignization retains the linguistic and cultural otherness of the original, challenging readers to engage with its alterity [3].

2. Domestication Strategy in Ying Ruocheng's Version: Cultural Adaptation and Reception Priority

Ying Ruocheng, who was both a dramatist and a performing artist, aimed to facilitate the successful staging of *Teahouse* for English-speaking audiences. This practical goal resulted in a pronounced domestication tendency in his translation.

2.1 Localized Conversion of Address Terms

Address terms in *Teahouse* often serve as markers of social hierarchy and regional identity. Ying Ruocheng frequently replaces them with functional equivalents in English. For instance, the Beijing honorific "爷" (Ye), which denotes respect and social standing, is directly translated as "Sir," sacrificing its cultural nuance for immediate comprehension. Similarly, the Beijing dialect particle "您呐" (Nin Na) is rendered as "you know" or omitted entirely, ensuring conversational fluency while still conveying the speaker's intended tone.

2.2 Equivalent Substitution of Idioms and Colloquialisms

Given that Chinese idioms are deeply embedded with cultural connotations [4], Ying Ruocheng often substitutes them with near-equivalent English idioms. When the character Wang Lifa says, “咱们可把话说开了, 省得大家心里都憋着块病,” Ying translates it as, “Let’s get everything off our chests, so we won’t have any hard feelings.” This conversion of a culturally specific Chinese expression into a common English idiom effectively achieves the same communicative goal of reconciliation.

2.3 Essentialist Approach to Culture-Specific Items

For concepts laden with unique cultural meanings, Ying Ruocheng adopts a standardized translation method. “铁杆庄稼” (Tiegan Zhuangjia), which literally means “iron-rod crops” but refers to a stable, government-guaranteed income in the Qing dynasty, is translated as “guaranteed government pay,” leveraging a familiar concept in the target culture to reduce semantic barriers and enhance reader reception.

From the perspective of theatrical performance, Ying Ruocheng’s domestication strategy was a pragmatic necessity. At a time when Western audiences were largely unfamiliar with Chinese culture, this approach of “cultural adaptation” effectively bridged cultural gaps to communicate the central themes and social critique of *Teahouse*.

3. Foreignization Strategy in Howard’s Version: Cultural Transmission and Cultural Feature Preservation

As a scholarly translator, Howard-Gibbon prioritized the reproduction of the source text’s linguistic and cultural features. His translation demonstrates a strong foreignization tendency, aiming to preserve the cultural otherness of the original and inviting readers to cross the cultural threshold.

3.1 Literal Translation and Contextual Explanation of Cultural Concepts

For uniquely Chinese concepts, Howard predominantly uses literal translation supplemented by contextual clues. For example, “铁杆庄稼” is translated as “iron-rice-bowl,” whose connotation of job security and reliability can be inferred from the surrounding dialogue. “您呐” is rendered as “you there” or “my dear sir.” While these translations may sound somewhat stilted in English, they faithfully signal the presence of a distinct linguistic register in the original Chinese.

3.2 Retention and Literal Translation of Images in Colloquialisms and Allusions

For colloquialisms rich in cultural allusions, Howard advocates preserving the original metaphors and images. The saying “井水不犯河水” (Jingshui bu fan heshui), meaning “mind your own business,” is literally translated as “Well water and river water don’t mix,” retaining the vivid imagery and the notion of non-interference. Similarly, “阎王好见, 小鬼难搪” (Yanwang hao jian, xiaogui nan tang), which comments on the difficulty of dealing with petty officials, is rendered as “The King of Hell is easy to meet, but his little devils are hard to handle.” This approach presents the Chinese folk cultural schema to the reader, allowing them to decipher the underlying meaning and appreciate the historical worldview reflected in the language.

Howard’s foreignization strategy reflects both a respect for the source culture and confidence in the target reader’s cognitive ability. In an era of accelerating globalization, this strategy aligns with a growing academic interest in an “authentic” representation of China and represents a mode of cultural translation that projects greater cultural confidence.

4. Underlying Motivations for Strategic Choice: Cultural Stance and Power Discourse

The divergent strategies employed in the two translations are rooted in the translators’ identities, objectives, and the power dynamics of their respective historical contexts.

4.1 Translator Identity and Target Orientation

Ying Ruocheng’s principles of “stage performability” and “immediate acceptability” guided his domestication strategy, which served the effective cross-cultural transmission of the play’s dramatic conflicts and themes, reflecting a pragmatic theatrical perspective. In contrast, Howard’s focus on textual and cultural fidelity led to a foreignization strategy aimed at providing a text that remains close to the source culture, demonstrating an academic stance that prioritizes the integrity of the original.

4.2 Historical Context and Power Relations

In the early years of China's reform and opening-up, when the West had limited knowledge of the country, Ying's domestication was a pragmatic choice to engage audiences and secure a platform for cultural dialogue. In today's globalized world, Howard's translation opens a new cultural window for Western readers [5]. Their interest in such a text stems from a broader worldview and a more diverse cultural cognition, which allows them to recognize and appreciate the uniqueness and allure of Chinese culture.

5. Conclusion

Ying Ruocheng's domesticated version lowers the barrier for cross-cultural understanding, making *Teahouse* accessible to English-speaking audiences. Howard's foreignized version, meanwhile, better showcases the culturally distinctive features of the play, stimulating Western readers' curiosity to explore Chinese culture further [6]. This comparative study of Ying Ruocheng's and John Howard's translations of *Teahouse* illustrates that domestication and foreignization are not mutually exclusive; rather, they reveal different facets of *Teahouse*'s cross-cultural existence. As complementary strategies, they serve different purposes for various audiences.

The translation history of *Teahouse* offers a valuable insight: exemplary literary translation should undertake the mission of facilitating intercultural communication. It should ensure that the history, humanity, and social criticism embedded within a work remain alive and resonant for readers in the target language, thereby fostering genuine dialogue and shared understanding across cultures.

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