



Culture Language Translation Methods and Teaching Strategies in Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio

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Abstract

Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio, written by Pu Songling during the Qing Dynasty, is a renowned collection of supernatural tales deeply rooted in Chinese culture. This study examines teaching of culture language in literary works from the perspective of translation and teaching strategies. The cultural terms found in "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio" are categorized into five distinct groups: ecological cultural terms, material cultural terms, institutional cultural terms, spiritual cultural terms and linguistic cultural terms. These categories, integral to Chinese language teaching, serve as mirrors reflecting not only the core values intrinsic to Chinese language culture but also the unique characteristics of traditional Chinese relics, natural ecosystems, humanistic philosophies, and cultural landscapes. This literary masterpiece thus becomes an invaluable textbook for imparting cultural insights through classical literature. The research aims of the study are, firstly, to determine the suitable translation methods for translating language cultural terms in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, to help those learning Chinese as a foreign language learners understand the cultural connotations of the Chinese cultural terms. Secondly, it aims to reveal the significance for learners to understand the connotations of Chinese cultural terms. Thirdly, it aims to further elaborate the translation methods that can be employed on appreciation of the theme and acknowledgment of the traditional Chinese sociocultural system and humanistic spirits, will help learners understand the surface and deeper meaning of Chinese cultural terms. This study adopts qualitative method to collect data, by testing the ability of target readers' understanding of this novel to reveal the extent of the their understanding of culture language connotations, and the either positive or negative influence determined by translation methods employed. Regarding the positive influence aspect, the study seeks to enhance learners' comprehension of the novel's themes and content, ultimately enabling them to attain a heightened level of appreciation. This improvement is achieved through the integration of appropriate teaching strategies.

Keywords: *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*; cultural terms; translation methods; translation strategies; appreciation ability; cultural connotation

1. Introduction

Culture, the shared beliefs, behaviors, and values of a group, is fundamental in foreign language teaching. According to Edward Tylor (1871), "culture...is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by (a human) as a member of society" (p.1). Understanding culture provides a framework for language, making communication more efficient and minimizing misinterpretations. Culture language teaching in foreign language education is crucial for fostering cultural awareness, enhancing language proficiency, and preparing learners for effective cross-cultural communication. *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, also known as *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*, a renowned classical literary work written by Pu Songling (1640-1715 AD) of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911AD). This classic work is a collection of 491 supernatural stories, anecdotes, and folklore that ridicule the officialdom and expose the darkness in the realistic society of the early Qing dynasty. It is an excellent resource for Chinese as a foreign language teaching, in which the abundant cultural terms will be greatly aid Chinese language learners in better understanding Chinese culture.

1.1 Problem statement

The challenge in teaching *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* to learners of Chinese as a foreign language lies in effectively translating and conveying its rich cultural content. The collection's abundance of cultural terms requires suitable translation methods and teaching strategies to ensure



that learners not only understand the surface meanings but also grasp the deeper cultural connotations. There is a lack of comprehensive research on the impact of various translation approaches and teaching methods in this context. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how to enhance learners' cultural insights, comprehension of themes, and appreciation of traditional Chinese culture within the framework of this literary masterpiece.

1.2 Research Objectives

The objectives of study focus on integration of culture language teaching within the context of literary works, emphasizing the significance of translation methods and teaching strategies in enhancing learners' cultural insights and language skills. The three objectives are listed below:

- (1) To identify effective translation methods for cultural terms in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* to aid Chinese as a foreign language learners in understanding cultural connotations.
- (2) To reveal the significance for Chinese as a foreign language learners to understand the connotations of Chinese cultural terms.
- (3) To explore translation methods that promote learners' comprehension of themes, enable recognition of traditional Chinese sociocultural systems, and facilitate a deeper understanding of Chinese cultural terms, enhancing their overall cultural and linguistic proficiency.

1.3 Research Significance

This study provides valuable insights into efficient translation methods and teaching strategies for conveying cultural terms in literary works like *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. These findings benefit educators, curriculum designers, and learners seeking to improve cultural and linguistic proficiency. They align with the broader objective of fostering cultural awareness and cross-cultural competence. The research bridges the gap between language learning and cultural understanding by exploring translation methods that enhance comprehension of themes and traditional Chinese sociocultural systems. Ultimately, this informs pedagogical practices in foreign language education, enriching the learning experiences of Chinese as a foreign language learners.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural terms

Cultural term refers to the concepts, relations, tools, phenomena or generally to physical and spiritual aspects of living in a particular society which is closely related to the specific culture of that nation. Mostly cultural words are easily recognizable on the basis of their obvious differences with the target language culture, being particular to source language, and being problematic in the process of translation (Newmark, 1981, p.94-95). Newmark (1988) believed that certain words could be replicated to represent a specialized language or terminology used by a speech community focused on a specific topic. In the realm of culture translation, Chinese linguist Zhou Zhipei introduced the concept of "cultural words" and classified them into two categories: the word (phrase) that carries the meaning of a cultural trait particular to a certain socio-cultural community, that is, whose reference is a unique thing or conception, and therefore that has no corresponding equivalent in other communities, when it is used in cross-cultural communication, it is referred to as word of cultural uniqueness or a cultural word (Zhou, 2003, p. 491). In *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, abundant cultural terms can be found. For example, the term "邑宰(yi zhai)" usually translated as "County Magistrate" in English. It refers to an official in ancient feudal China responsible for managing and governing a county. The official titles presents administrative systems of ancient China, offering readers valuable insights of into the historical and cultural context of the Qing Dynasty.

2.2 Categories of cultural terms

Eugene A. Nida (2001, p. 82) divided language-culture into ecological culture, material culture, social culture, religious culture, and linguistic culture. Newmark (1988, p.9) classified cultural terms into five categories: ecology, material culture, social culture, social organizations (organization, customs, ideas, activities, procedures, concepts), gestures and habits. Zhou Zhipei further divided culturally loaded terms (phrases) into three types: those with "different classification, different association, and different cultural norms" (Zhou, 2003, p. 492). Building upon the cultural terms classifications of Nida, Newmark, and Zhou Zhipei, this study categorizes the cultural terms found in the English translations of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* into five major categories: ecological cultural terms, material cultural terms, institutional cultural terms, spiritual cultural terms and linguistic cultural terms. "ecological



cultural term” encompass geographical and ecological features in the source culture, such as unique names for flora and fauna, geographical terms, and climate-related terminology. An example of this category is 兰麝 (lan she) which is often used to describe a delicate and pleasing fragrance, where “兰 (lan)” refers to the scent of orchids, and “麝 (she)” refers to the aroma of musk. “Material cultural term” refer to unique vocabulary related to clothing, food, housing, transportation, and leisure activities, including everyday objects, tools, utensils, and even units of measurement in the source culture. For instance, “尺(chi),” translated as “foot” in English, is a unit of length in the traditional Chinese measurement system, equivalent to 10 inches. “Institutional cultural terms” includes words related to political institutions, seasonal customs, social behavioral norms, ethics, standards, and both written and unwritten rules. Examples from *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* include official titles, terminology related to the imperial examination system, and vocabulary associated with wedding and marriage customs like “青庐(qinglu)”and “吉服(ji fu)”. “Spiritual cultural terms” often consist of abstract vocabulary that reflects a nation’s philosophical thinking, ideology, and religious culture. Examples include Chinese concepts like “阴(yin),” “阳(yang),” “道(Dao).” “linguistic cultural terms” are words that reflect the phonetic and written characteristics of a language community. Idioms, allusions, proverbs, rhetoric, word formation, and character construction, with their unique formal and semantic features, carry a wealth of historical traditions and customs. For example, the proverb “黑面如漆 (hei mian ru qi),” which means “as dark as lacquer,” is used to describe a pitch-black complexion.

2.3 Connotations of cultural terms

From the definition of Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary(2023), “Connotations refers the suggesting of a meaning by a word apart from the thing it explicitly names or describes”.The concept of connotations of cultural terms relates to the additional layers of meaning, emotions, and cultural significance attached to words beyond their literal definitions. These connotations are context-specific and can vary between cultures, influencing effective communication and translation. Understanding cultural term connotations is vital for cross-cultural interactions and promotes cultural awareness.

3. Methodology

This study adopts Culturally relevant teaching and enhancement test to delve into cultural terms within *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* and their impact on learners, to improve their ability of literary appreciation.

3.1 Culturally relevant teaching

Culturally relevant teaching (CRT) is a pedagogy grounded in teachers’ practice of cultural competence, or skill at teaching in a cross-cultural or multicultural setting. Teachers using this method encourage each student to relate course content to their cultural context (Gay.2010). Constructivism theory laid the foundation of CRT. In the context of teaching Chinese culture using *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, group discussions and an enhancement test play essential role in improving respondents’ comprehension of cultural terms. Firstly, the teacher selects a set of cultural terms that hold significant cultural connotations and divide learners into small groups of 4-6. Secondly, within each of these groups, the teacher assigns one of the selected categories of cultural terms for exploration. These categories encompass ecological, material, institutional, spiritual, and linguistic cultural terms. Clear and detailed instructions are provided to the learners, emphasizing that the goal is to explore the cultural connotations and significance of the assigned terms. Thirdly, the group discussion session is carefully structured and designed to last around 30 minutes. During this allotted time, learners are actively encouraged to discuss and analyze the distinctions between the literal and free translation versions of their designated terms. This exercise serves to help them better comprehend and effectively convey the cultural connotations of these terms. Fourthly, the teacher plays a dual role during the discussion, as a facilitator, the teacher guides and moderates the discussion, ensuring that it remains focused and encouraging active participation from all group members. As a resource provider, the teacher offers reference materials, including excerpts from *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, multimedia resources such as images, videos, or audio clips, as well as reference materials that can significantly aid in comprehension. This teaching methodology provides a comprehensive framework for learners to not only grasp the meanings of cultural terms but also to gain a deeper understanding of their cultural context, enriching their overall learning experience.

3.2 Enhancement test



The enhancement test consists of 20 questions related to selected cultural terms, including both the literal and cultural meanings. The test is designed to be bilingual, with the first 10 questions conducted in Chinese and the subsequent 10 questions requiring English translations of the terms. This format allows learners to demonstrate their comprehension in both languages. The respondents, consisting of 84 learners who has passed the HSK level 4, with the first 10 questions conducted in Chinese, providing responses in Chinese, and the subsequent 10 questions requiring English translations of the terms. Each group was given a time limit of 30 minutes to complete the test. The list of selected cultural terms is provided below:

Categories of cultural terms	Secondary categories	Words selected from <i>Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio</i>	English translation	Translation method	Marks of each
ecological cultural terms	plants	Q6 葭苈 "jia fu" refers to the thin membrane inside the reed, and metaphorically, it refers to more distant relatives	closely related	literal translation	10%
		Q13 麝兰 "she lan" refers to musk and orchid fragrance	the scent of musk and orchid	literal translation	
material cultural terms	utensils	Q7 鼎铛油镬 "ding dang you huo" refers to boiling oil in a cauldron or wok to scald someone	cauldrons and works filled with boiling oil	literal translation	15%
		Q4 鬋凤 "huan feng" refers to "phoenix hairpin", which is a women's hair ornament.	phoenix ornaments	literal translation	
		Q18 箫管 "xiao guan" is a kind of musical instrument made of bamboo	flageolet	literal translation	
institutional cultural terms	official titles	Q2 孝廉 "xiao lian" refers to the specific title of a graduate passed a vigorous exam in Qing Dynasty	Provincial Graduate	free translation	5%
	social values	Q5 初学涂鸦 "chu xue tu ya" refers to a beginner's scribbles, with many revisions and corrections, to describe the early stages of studying	write very indifferent prose	free translation	5%
	customs festivals	Q20 寒食 "han shi" known as the Cold Food Festival, one of China's traditional festivals	the Cold Food Festival	literal translation	5%
spiritual cultural terms	religion	Q3 随喜 "sui xi" is a Buddhist term, which means visiting temples and playing with others	went out to greet them and took them on a tour of the precincts	free translation	25%
		Q10 广寒 "guang han" refers to the moon palace	Cold Palace	literal translation	
		Q11 寿籍 "shou ji" refers to the thin booklet in Chinese superstitions and legends that records people's lifespan	longevity file	literal translation	
		Q16 散花天女 "san hua tian nv" refers to the Goddess in Buddhist sutra stories.	Apsaras Scattering Flowers, beautiful fairylike beings	literal translation + addition	
		Q19 物化 "wu hua" is a euphemism for death	transformed	literal translation	
linguistic cultural terms	allusion	Q4 结草以报 "jie cao yi bao" means to repay kindness even after death	grateful	free translation	15%
		Q8 曹丘 "cao qiu" is synonymous with someone who recommends or introduces others	Maecenas	substitution	
		Q9 关壮缪 "guan zhuang mu" Guan Yu, a renowned military general during the Three Kingdoms	the God of War, Guan Yu	free translation	
	metaphor	Q1 喧如鼎沸 "xuan ru ding fei" describes roaring like a boiling cauldron	seething cauldron	literal translation	10%
		Q15 黑面如漆 "hei mian ru qi" describes a person's face as black as pitch	a face as black as jet	free translation	
	actions	Q12 启睑拨视 "qi jian bo shi" refers to pull open the eyelids to take a look	lift up his eyelids and take a look inside	literal translation	10%
		Q17 反身鸢顾 "fan shen e gu" refers to someone turn around and look at it ferociously	cast a piercing gaze around him	literal translation	
total marks					100%

Table 1 Categories of cultural terms in the test selected from *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*

4. Research findings and results

From the responses of target respondents, the research outcome can be summarized as below: The mean score answered questions in English (29.8810) was higher than the mean score that responded in Chinese (27.0833). This suggests that learners performed better on questions related to



English translations of cultural terms compared to those in Chinese. The variation in scores across questions could be attributed to the familiarity of the cultural terms, the clarity of the translation methods employed, and the non-native Chinese respondents' level of proficiency in Chinese.

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Chinese	84	10.00	50.00	27.0833	8.50968
English	84	10.00	50.00	29.8810	8.81456
Valid N (listwise)	84				

Fig.1 Descriptive Statistics of two groups test results

Based on the results of the 20 questions related to selected cultural terms, questions 4, 5, 7, 12, and 16 received the highest mean scores, indicating that respondents performed well in understanding both the literal and cultural meanings of the terms in these questions. On the other hand, questions 10, 15, 18, and 19 received the lowest mean scores, suggesting that respondents struggled more with these questions. These questions fall into the categories of spiritual and linguistic cultural terms, such as religious related terms like “广寒(guang han)” and “物化(wu hua)”, and metaphors expression “黑面如漆(hei mian ru qi)” highlighting the challenge of cultural understanding for learners who do not share the same cultural background. Despite the use of appropriate translation methods as teaching aids, these questions illustrate that difficulties in cultural comprehension persist. This emphasizes the importance of addressing cultural nuances and providing context in cultural teaching, particularly when dealing with terms deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts. It suggests that educators should employ strategies that extend beyond translation, engaging learners in activities aimed at promoting cross-cultural understanding and awareness.

5. Conclusion

This research focus on the significance of effectively teaching cultural language in the context of Chinese classic literary works such as *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. While categorizing cultural terms and employing suitable translation methods are crucial, it is essential to integrate cultural language teaching with other teaching methods for a comprehensive approach.

(1) Contextual teaching

Providing additional explanations or exercises to enhance their comprehension is crucial. For example, when learners are studying the cultural term “吉服 (ji fu)”, which refers to a formal dress worn in special occasion. Instead of just explaining its literal meaning, instructors could provide context by showing images of ancient Chinese dress with “吉服.” By incorporating this term into sentences or short stories describing its historical significance and usage, learners can grasp its meaning within real-life scenarios, fostering a deeper understanding.

(2) Cultural immersion

Considering a cultural immersion activity where students watch a classic Chinese film that features traditional ceremonies and rituals, such as a wedding scene. During this experience, students encounter cultural terms associated with these ceremonies, like “嫁妆 (jia zhuang)” referring to a bride's dowry. This immersion not only exposes them to the term but also helps them understand its cultural connotations and significance in the context of Chinese weddings.

(3) Addressing cultural loss

Learners can examine the issue of cultural loss through misinterpretation. For example, translating the Chinese concept of “阴阳 (yin yang)” as “negative and positive” may overlook its profound cultural and philosophical depths. Instructors can prompt students to explore the broader ideas of balance, harmony, and interconnections conveyed by “阴阳,” emphasizing the importance of precise interpretation and avoiding cultural oversimplification.

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