



# Cultural Connotation and Stylistic Preservation: Exploring the Translation Strategies of Culture-specific Items in *Brothers*

Min Zhang<sup>1</sup>, Ziyun Guan<sup>2</sup>

School of Foreign Languages, Northwest University, Shaanxi, China

<sup>1</sup>zhangmin@nwu.edu.cn

<sup>2</sup>caylynnnguan@163.com (Corresponding author)

**Abstract.** Against the backdrop of the popularity of Chinese literary works in the inter-national market, how to accurately convey the cultural connotation without dimming the writing style of the source language has always been a difficulty in cultural translation and communication. As Yu Hua's longest novel, the English translation of *Brothers* triggered a huge response upon its release. However, there are still relatively few studies on its English translation. In this regard, the concept of Culture-specific Item and its translation strategy pro-posed by Aixelá can be used for guidance and reference. This paper studies the translation method of CSIs in the English version of *Brothers*, and further analyzes the applicability of eleven translation strategies and four variables proposed by Aixelá to the English version.

**Keywords:** *Brothers*; Culture-specific Item; Aixelá's translation strategy

## 1 Introduction

Under the background of “Going Global” Strategy, one of the masterpieces of Chinese literature, *Brothers*, written by Yu Hua, was an instant hit due to its combination of earnest realism and pointed satire. Later, Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas translated this book from Chinese to English together. Thanks to a long history of more than 5,000 years, Chinese literary works have quite rich connotations. Chinese authors create literary works with deep cultural root so that there are a number of cultural expressions used in Chinese literature. Although these expressions give Chinese literary works special characteristics and create a unique culture, it's quite hard for people from different cultural backgrounds to understand<sup>[2]</sup>. Therefore, how to translate words or clauses that contain exclusive cultural meaning has always been a difficult problem for translators<sup>[5][9]</sup>. In 1996, this kind of exclusive cultural term was named as Culture-specific Item (CSI) by a Spanish translator, Javier Franco Aixelá. He proposed 11 translation strategies and 4 variables to solve this translation difficulty, which may offer a relatively new perspective for Chinese-English translation. This study is going to analyze the Chinese-English translation of *Brothers* from this perspective.

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## 2 Brothers and its English Version

As cultural exchanges become more frequent, many Chinese literary works have been introduced and translated overseas. In 2009, *Brothers* was translated into English, which shows the life story of two brothers in times of change.

Since the English version of *Brothers* was launched by Random House in the United States in 2009, many mainstream media and scholars have praised it a lot. The American commentator, Maureen Corrigan (2009), praised *Brothers* in *Fresh Air* as a “tremendous novel in tone and historical scope and narrative technique”. She believed that this book is a sweeping satire of modern China and a terrific literary achievement.<sup>[11]</sup> However, it may be challenging for western people to understand. As what Jess Row wrote in *New York Times*, reading *Brothers* in English can be a “daunting, sometimes vexing and deeply confusing experience”. Because it is too difficult to find an English equivalent for the direct CSIs in the novel. The strangeness of this English translation version also illustrates how far the gap between “common reference and understanding between China and the West”.<sup>[12]</sup>

Chinese scholars mainly have two research directions about its translation. One is to study the applicability of translation strategies based on the narrative style and language of *Brothers*. According to previous research, most researchers focus on the culture-loaded words and narrative typology, including simile, metaphor, prenarration and so on<sup>[1]</sup>. The other is to study the acceptance of different translation versions in other countries. A scholar attributes much of Yu’s success overseas to translators and publishers<sup>[4]</sup>, and this point of view is reasonable. The brief interval between the Chinese and English versions of *Brothers* kept the book contemporary, while the publisher’s minimal interference retained its Chinese essence.

Despite both positive and negative reviews, there is no denying that this book has caused a huge stir in the English-speaking countries. But we can also discover from the previous research that the studies on the translation of *Brothers* abroad are not that abundant. As we can see, “translator invisibility” still exists and deserves attention.

## 3 Aixelá’S Culture-Specific Items

The Spanish translator, Javier Franco Aixelá, first proposed the concept of Culture-specific Items in his article “Culture-specific Items in Translation” in 1996. In his opinion, Culture-specific Items are “those textually actualized items whose function and connotations in a source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a target text”. Aixelá raised two basic categories of proper nouns: conventional proper nouns and loaded proper nouns. He deems that conventional proper nouns have no meaning on their own, while loaded proper nouns have more cultural meaning.<sup>[7]</sup>

By observing three Spanish translations of *The Maltese Falcon*, written by American author Dashiell Hammett, Aixelá summarized translation strategies of CSIs. In the article, he categorized the translation strategies into two major groups: conservation and substitution, which can be separated by their conservative or substitutive nature, and summarized as 11 translation strategies in all: repetition, orthographic adaptation,

linguistic (non-cultural) translation, extratextual gloss, intratextual gloss, synonymy, limited universalization, absolute universalization, naturalization, deletion, autonomous creation. Additionally, there are four types of variables that may affect the choice of translation strategies: supratextual parameter, textual parameter, the nature of the CSI, intratextual parameter<sup>[6]</sup>.

Based on the definition of CSI, Eugene A. Nida divided Culture-specific Items into five categories: religious culture, linguistic culture, ecology culture, social culture and material culture.<sup>[10]</sup> Following Nida's classification, this paper divides the Culture-specific Items in *Brothers* into three categories based on the content of the novel: linguistic culture, social culture and material culture.

## 4 Analysis of the Translation of *Brothers From the Perspective of Csis*

### 4.1 Linguistic Culture-specific Item

The linguistic culture-specific item mainly includes pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and cultural characteristics of language system of a certain language group. It is formed in a specific culture and reflect the language characteristics and national wisdom of the nation. For Chinese, it is more reflected in the four-character words, idioms, colloquial expressions, proverbs and poetry. In *Brothers*, the author used many colloquial expressions and proverbs to enrich the characters and show local characteristics.

#### Example 1

Source Text: 李光头母亲在世的时候，总喜欢对李光头说：有其父必有其子。她这话指的是宋钢，她说宋钢忠诚善良，说宋钢和他父亲一模一样，说这父子俩就像是一根藤上结出来的两个瓜。<sup>[3]</sup>

Translation: Back when Baldy Li's mother was still alive, she always liked to speak to him about Song Gang as being a chip off the old block. She would emphasize how honest and kind he was, just like his father, and remark that father and son were like two melons from the same vine.<sup>[8]</sup>

Analysis: Analysis: This excerpt includes two linguistic CSIs but two different translation strategies are used. The former one “有其父必有其子” is an old Chinese proverb from Kong Congzi, which mainly describes the thoughts and behaviors of Confucius and his family descendants. However, if this proverb is literally translated as “like father, like son”, the cultural connotation of the proverb might be lost. Therefore, naturalization strategy is used to solve this problem. Naturalization strategy is to find a CSI from target culture to translate the CSI in source text. In this excerpt, the translator chooses another idiom from the target language “a chip off the old block” in order to remain the connotation. This idiom is an informal idiom in British English, which refers to someone who is very similar in character to their father or mother. As we can see, the meaning of these two sentences are quite similar, and the cultural equivalent is also achieved through the application of naturalization strategy. The latter one “一根藤上结出来的两个瓜”, referring to two people who have similar personalities, is liter-

ally translated as “two melons from the same vine”. Although this expression does not exist in English, it is understandable for target readers with the former idiom.

#### Example 2

Source Text: 赵诗人不再对刘作家表示同情和惋惜了，他摆了摆手，不屑地说：“他呀，成不了什么气候。”

Translation: So Poet Zhao no longer expressed his sympathy and regret at his compatriot's downfall. With a dismissive wave, he sniffed, “Well, he could never amount to much.”

Analysis: In Chinese, “成气候” is an informal colloquial expression, referring to someone who has a bright future. Loaded with thick Chinese color, the word “气候” is beyond the target readers' comprehension. Hence, this expression is replaced with simple gloss “never amount to much”. Evidently, absolute universalization can be applied to colloquial expressions efficiently. The translator chooses non-cultural reference to translate the CSI in source text in order to promote the understandings.

#### Example 3

Source Text: 刘作家虽然筹办婚事了，可是他身在曹营心在汉。

Translation: Even though Writer Liu was in the thick of his wedding preparations, he was still dreaming of greener pastures.

Analysis: “身在曹营心在汉” is a Chinese idiom from Romance of the Three Kingdoms, written by Luo Guanzhong. This idiom originally means that Guan Yu is in Cao's base, thinking of Liu Bei. It means that someone is on the opposite side, but thinking of the side he was on before. But without a deep understanding of Chinese history and culture, it is difficult for target readers to understand the meaning of this idiom. Thus, by applying the naturalization strategy, the translator replaces the former esoteric idiom with an English idiom “green pasture”, which means a new place or activity that offers new opportunities or is more favorable or beneficial. “Green pasture” perfectly explains the situation and the real thought of Writer Liu, showing his hypocrisy.

## 4.2 Social Culture-specific Item

The social culture-specific item embraces many respects of daily life, including traditions, customs, behaviors, social activities, moral codes and so on. The social CSI appears extensively in *Brothers*, constituting the most authentic portrayal of Chinese common people's lives. As social CSI is very close to local society and culture, how to translate social CSI properly and remain the cultural connotation as well has become the focus of many translators.

#### Example 4

Source Text: 宋钢为爷爷披麻戴孝十四天，过了头七和二七之后，宋钢开始整理起自己的行装，他把破屋子和几件破家具分送给了几个穷亲戚。

Translation: For fourteen days Song Gang wore a hemp shirt in mourning, and at the conclusion of his second seven-day mourning cycle, he packed his things, leaving the shack and the few pieces of furniture to his relatives.

Analysis: If a CSI contains too much exotic cultural colors, there is a tendency that translators prefer to add their own explanation in translation, both extratextual and intratextual, to avoid misunderstanding and ambiguity. This excerpt is a very typical example of using intratextual gloss to explain the social CSIs. The three CSIs, “披麻戴孝”, “头七” and “二七”, are the traditional burial system and etiquette norms that has existed in China since ancient times. Influenced by Buddhism, Chinese people tend to stay by their loved ones’ side for fourteen days, a cycle of every seven days, after their death, and to wear hemp shirts and white flowers to express condolences. On the contrary, Western people generally believe in Christianity. Their funeral ceremonies are quite different from ours, so it is hard for them to understand the reason why Chinese people wear hemp shirts in funeral. The translator handles this problem properly by applying intratextual gloss in translation, adding “in mourning” after “a hemp shirt”, so that it is understandable why Song Gang wore it. “头七” and “二七” are actually the same CSI, since they are both parts of the fourteen days of mourning. Therefore, the translator adds “mourning cycle” in translation to make sense. The choice of intratextual gloss translation strategy not only makes the obscure CSIs plausible, but also preserves the cultural of the original text.

#### Example 5

Source Text: 陶青吃惊地看着李兰, 又看看李光头, 随即点点头说: “能拿到, 每月有八元钱, 二十斤粮票, 油票和布票是每季度发一次, 一直拿到他参加工作为止。”

Translation: Tao Qing stared at Li Lan in astonishment. He looked at Baldy Li and nodded. “Yes, he would. He’d qualify for eight yuan a month, plus twenty jin’s worth of grain, oil, and cloth ration coupons every season. And he’d receive aid until he starts work.”

Analysis: In the early days of the founding of New China, the country’s financial resources were empty and materials were strained due to the depletion of war. At that time, various kinds of ration coupons were created to equitably distribute food and ensure everyone’s basic needs. “粮票”, “油票” and “布票” reflect the conditions and characteristics of China’s mode of production and people’s living standards in a particular social period and historical stage. Due to the distribution mode is according to the population ration distribution, the translator translates “票” as “ration coupon” instead of “ticket”. This kind of intratextual gloss translation strategy simplifies the description or explanation of social background of source text as well as avoids disturbing the readers.

#### Example 6

Source Text: 县卫生局发出通告, 像余拔牙这样的江湖郎中都要进行考试, 合格后发放行医执照, 不合格就要被取消行医资格。

Translation: The county’s Hygiene Bureau had announced that “freelance” doctors like himself now had to take an exam: Those who passed would be given a formal medical license, while those who didn’t would be stripped of their right to practice.

Analysis: In the past, because of the inadequate and inefficient health care system, there were many “江湖郎中” in China, especially in rural areas. They are doctors without any formal medical licenses or regular house calls. Most of them haven’t go to

medical schools to study medicine systematically, but rely on their personal experiences. Although they may not be the most professional, they saved many lives in that particular social context. The translation of “江湖郎中” is “freelance doctors”. The translator doesn’t choose to literally translate this CSI, but to reveal the connotation of the word “江湖”, which means everywhere in general. “Freelance” refers to a job that doesn’t have a regular commute or a fixed work place. As we can see, this description is very close to “江湖郎中” in Chinese.

### 4.3 Material Culture-specific Item

Material culture-specific item is one of the most common CSI in Chinese literature. China is a country with a vast territory and abundant products. Each region has its own material CSIs. What’s more, the differences between Eastern countries and Western countries are so immense that people are hard to understand each other’s material culture. Chinese novels with local colors are even more difficult. How to translate these material CSIs is always a difficulty for translators.

Examples are as follows:

(1) Source Text: 他们人多势众，他们嬉笑着问宋凡平，是不是要请他们喝喜酒？<sup>[3]</sup>

Translation: They knew they had him outnumbered and sneeringly asked him, “Do you want to treat us to a wedding banquet?”

(2) Source Text: 他说一定要找一个时间，打上一斤黄酒，炒上两个小菜，坐下来聊个通宵，聊个死去活来。<sup>[3]</sup>

Translation: He said they had to find time to get a jug of wine and some snacks and shoot the breeze all night long.

(3) Source Text: 日本喝豆浆的碗比我们刘镇喝茶的茶盅还要小，那油条更是细得跟筷子似的。<sup>[3]</sup>

Translation: The bowls they use in Japan are even smaller than our teacups, and their fritters are thinner than chopsticks.

(4) Source Text: 那些日子，李光头的李记回收公司里比茶馆还要热闹。<sup>[3]</sup>

Translation: Li’s Salvage and Recycling Company was livelier than a teahouse.

(5) Source Text: 李光头和宋钢就是从那时候知道什么叫扫堂腿。<sup>[3]</sup>

Translation: Baldy Li and Song Gang at that moment learned what a “sweeping leg kick” was.

Analysis: With the support of pre-established translation, many material CSIs are transliterated into English, such as “喜酒”, “茶馆” and “筷子”. To a certain extent, this kind of material CSI is easy to understand, and some of them have even been incorporated into the lives of foreigners, like “teahouse” and “chopsticks”. Thus, it is applicable to transliterate these words.

In addition to these pre-established translations, some material CSIs are translated by using the absolute universalization translation strategy, such as “黄酒”, “小菜”, and “茶盅”. These material CSIs are partly deleted their foreign connotations in translation. The translator chooses some neutral references for readers. For example, “黄酒” is translated as “wine” directly instead of “Huangjiu” or “yellow rice wine”. The trans-

lator doesn't choose to explain this kind of traditional ancient wine, which is only brewed in China, but chooses a non-CSI word to replace. Since material CSIs appear in large numbers in the source text, it is unrealistic to translate every CSI in details. Even if the translator takes pains to explain these material CSIs, the reader will be unable to imagine them due to the lack of relevant cultural background, resulting in dyslexia and reading burden. Therefore, the choice of absolute universalization is a good way to deal with these obscure material culture-specific items.

Last but not least, there are also some material CSIs that have no pre-established translations and are hard to find non-CSI words to replace. This kind of material CSIs mostly uses intratextual gloss translation strategy to translate. “扫堂腿”, for instance, is translated as “sweeping leg kick”. The translator translates this CSI according to his own understanding instead of transliterating it or finding another non-CSI word. As we can see, the choice of this translation strategy can not only explain the unfamiliar material CSI clearly, but also avoid adding too many explanations outside of the text.

#### 4.4 Influence of Variables on the Choice of Translation Strategies for CSIs

According to Aixelá's theory, there are four main variables that affect the choice of translation strategies for CSIs: supratextual parameter, textual parameter, the nature of the CSI and intratextual parameter. On the basis of the research above, different categories of CSI are affected by different variables.

Linguistic culture-specific items are mostly proverbs and idioms so that some common proverbs and idioms already have definite translations. Translators don't have to change too much but just follow the former translators. For example, in *Brothers*, “有其父必有其子” was translated into “a chip off the old block”. Both the source text and the translation are proverbs and have similar meaning so that the translator can take use of the pre-established translation directly. Besides, unlike other source texts, *Brothers* has no other translation versions for reference, so it is less affected by textual parameter. Linguistic CSI is usually not repeated many times in the text on account of the author's desire for richer language and other reasons. So it is less affected by intratextual parameter, either.

Social culture-specific items mainly consist of customs and social activities, such as “披麻戴孝” and “粮票”. Usually, social CSIs are under particular social background. Due to this reason, the translation of social CSI is mostly affected by supratextual parameter. For the English translation of *Brothers*, it combines both Chinese cultural background and western cultural background because of its translators. The two translators, from different cultural backgrounds, made great contribution on the translation of material CSIs. Due to the knowledge of their own culture, they can gain an insight into the meaning of the source text and the expectations of the target language readers. As we can see, translators have to be very familiar with the social context of source text and be aware of readers' expectation and their lacks of exotic culture. Only in this way can translators translate social CSIs properly.

Material culture-specific item is one of the CSIs's most frequent used in the article. The variable affects material CSI and the reason are similar to social CSI. Under dif-

ferent social backgrounds, people's diet, accommodation and daily lives are quite different. Translators must deal with the massive material CSIs carefully. For those material CSIs that always appear in the article, more detailed explanation is needed, while for those that only appear once, the translation can be simplified as much as possible to reduce the strangeness and reading burden of readers. A typical set of opposite examples is “小菜” and “扫堂腿”. In *Brothers*, “小菜” only appears once, so the translators just translated it into “snacks” without any further explanation. On the contrary, “扫堂腿” is an important CSI which connects the main plot of the text. Thus, considering its actual meaning, it was translated into “sweeping leg kick”.

In short, based on the content and the English version of *Brothers* and the analysis of CSI theory, it is found that linguistic culture-specific items are mostly affected by the nature of CSI; social culture-specific items are mainly affected by supratextual parameter; material culture-specific items are mostly affected by supratextual parameter and intratextual parameter.

## 5 Conclusion

With the advent of the We-Media era, cultural exchanges are becoming more and more frequent. Unlike those deliberate cultural promotions, literature is one of the easiest way to approach people's daily lives. However, literature from exotic culture has been neglected overseas sometimes. The main reason is that the translation is not appropriate, which causes difficulty in reading for target readers. One of the most remarkable challenges in the process of translation is the translation of words that bear cultural connotations, or we can call it as Culture-specific Items. Ever since Aixelá came up with this theory, many experts and scholars have studied its feasibility. As what has been mentioned in this paper, Aixelá's translation strategies provide beneficial support for the translation of CSIs that appear in *Brothers*. This paper divides the CSIs in *Brothers* into three categories: linguistic culture, social culture and material culture.

According to the previous analyses, we can find out which translation strategies can be applied and how they can be used. The translation of linguistic culture-specific items mainly employs naturalization and absolute universalization strategy and are mostly affected by the variable of the nature of CSI; the translation of social culture-specific items mainly employs intratextual gloss and linguistic (non-cultural) translation strategy and are mainly affected by supratextual parameter; the translation of material culture-specific items mainly employs absolute universalization strategy and are mostly affected by supratextual parameter and intratextual parameter.

Although there are many studies about *Brothers* and its author, there is still very few research on the respect of its translation. Hopefully, this study can arouse more attention to the translation of *Brothers* and accordingly, the dissemination of Chinese literary works to the world.

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