

# An exploration on the Cultural Loss in the Translation of Camel Xiangzi from the Post-colonial Perspective

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## Abstract:

Chinese literature *Camel Xiangzi*, written by Lao She, has exerted a vast influence among overseas readers. Through the study, we found that despite Evan Kin's excessive domestication and rewriting in his translation, his version still achieved great success in the United States at that time, which violated the literary and cultural value of the original work and constituted cultural hegemony to some extent. It is a pity that a classic work has become a tool for pleasing natives and that the cultural elements in it have been lost to varying degrees, partly to the point of exhaustion. Based on cultural dimensions such as language, religion, and society, as well as the characterization of the protagonist Xiangzi, this paper explores the phenomenon of cultural loss in Kin's translation in terms of post-colonial theory. Moreover, we also recommend that translators attach great importance to having a responsible translation ethic, protecting cultural diversity, and advocating to restore the regional, linguistic, and cultural traits of the source language as originally as possible.

**Keywords:** Post-colonization; Cultural loss; *Camel Xiangzi*

## 1. Introduction

Under the impetus of globalization, cross-cultural communication is becoming more and more frequent. As an important carrier of cultural communication, the translation and dissemination of literary works are of great significance to the understanding and communication between different cultures. Up to now, the study of translation solely from the perspective of language can no longer achieve the needs of society. It is necessary to break away from the language itself and consider the text in the specific historical and cultural background, political and economic background, power discourse, gender differences and other factors so that translation research can achieve higher social value [1].

The *Camel Xiangzi* [2], written by Lao She, is a masterpiece full of Beijing flavor, is rich in folk language and regional culture and is an excellent model for studying the social reality of old China in the late 1920s. There are two most famous English versions of *Camel Xiangzi*: *Rickshaw Boy* [3] published by Evan Kin in 1945 and *Camel Xiangzi* published by Lynette Shi [4] in 1981. Judging from the traditional translation research standards, Evan kin's translation does not achieve the basic requirements of "equivalence" or "faithfulness" [5]. On the one hand,

Kin adopted excessive domestication of the original novel. On the other hand, he deleted a lot of descriptions about the hero Xiangzi, but added a lot of explicit details about sex and even changed the tragic ending to a happy reunion. From the post-colonial perspective, it is not difficult to find the phenomenon of cultural loss in the translation and the deep reasons behind it.

The post-colonial translation theory was born in the middle and late 1980s, which has aroused extensive discussion in academic circles and is an expansion of post-colonial theory in the field of translation. It explores the unequal relationship between culture and power, covering a number of core issues. Among the representatives, in addition to the "Three Musketeers", Tejaswini Niranjana, Lawrence Venuti and Douglas Robinson also made outstanding contributions. Douglas Robinson's book *Translation and Empire* is a necessary read for the study of this theory, deeply analyzing the close connection between translation and politics, especially the changes in the translation of weak cultural texts into strong cultural languages, which is the core concern of post-colonial translation theory [6]. The postcolonial theory holds that translation is not only a conversion between languages but also a negotiation and struggle between cultures. In the translation of *Camel Xiangzi*, the translator is inevitably influenced by his own

cultural background, social experience, and language habits so as to interpret and reconstruct the cultural connotation of the original text. This process of interpretation and reconstruction is often accompanied by the loss of culture; that is, some cultural elements in the original text cannot be accurately conveyed or retained in the translation [6]. Based on the cultural dimensions such as language, religion and society, as well as the characterization of the protagonist Xiangzi, this paper aims to explore the phenomenon of cultural loss in the translation version of *Evan Kin with examples* from the post-colonial theory.

## 2. Analysis of the translation of Camel Xiangzi

This fiction will focus on specific translations of the character Xiangzi. The description of the characters in this paper embodies the cultural characteristics and the symbol of the local people. Xiangzi's image is not only an individual, but also represents a class of people like him.

### 2.1 Language dimension

The language dimension of this paper mainly refers to the translator's treatment of the original words, focusing on the description of material culture as an example to analyze the cultural loss caused by the process of translation. Material culture refers to the material civilization created by human beings, and the visible and tangible material and spiritual products. Including food culture, clothing culture, architectural culture, and so on. In Lao She's *Camel Xiangzi*, there are a large number of material terms containing Chinese cultural characteristics. The following are some specific examples:

Example 1: 一到腊七腊八，锅里就沸上白米，红枣，莲子，百合等物，满满地煮一锅腊八粥。这粥是家家都要熬的，很甜，很黏 [2]。

Translation: "As soon as the seventh and eighth days of the twelfth lunar month arrive, families start boiling a pot of sweet and sticky Laba porridge, filled with white rice, red dates, lotus seeds, and lilies[3]."

The Laba porridge in the original text is not just a kind of food [7]. Behind it are traditional customs before the Chinese New Year, which symbolize harvest, reunion, and blessing. The festival custom is closely linked to the Chinese lunar calendar and agricultural social background, and the ingredients and practices of Laba porridge may vary from place to place, reflecting the diversity and geography of Chinese culture. However, in the translation, although "Laba porridge" accurately conveys the basic attributes of food, it fails to fully demonstrate the cultural significance and emotional value behind it. In addition, the detail of "every family should endure" in the original text emphasizes the universality and importance of this

custom, but it is simplified to "families start boiling" in the translation, and this simplified treatment weakens the cultural atmosphere of the original text.

Example 2: “祥子心里直嘀咕：’这年头，拉车的怎么就这么难混呢？’”[2]

Translation: “Xiangzi couldn't help but wonder, 'Why is it so hard to make a living as a rickshaw puller these days?'"[3]

The "whisper" in the original text is an oral expression of Xiangzi's inner helplessness and doubts, but it also reflects the hardships of the people at the bottom of society at that time. This colloquial expression enhances the vividness and realism of the text. However, in the translation, although "couldn't help but wonder" expresses the meaning of doubt, it lacks the emotional color and oral characteristics contained in the action of "whispering". In addition, the phrase "this year" in the original text is an expression with a sense of The Times, referring to the social unrest and unrest at that time, but it is not clearly reflected in the translation, leading to a certain loss of culture.

Example 3: “他觉得自己像是一头被囚禁在黑暗中的野兽，渴望冲破束缚，却又找不到出路 [2]。”

Translation: “He felt like a beast trapped in darkness, yearning to break free but unable to find a way out [3].”

The metaphor in the original text of "a beast imprisoned in the dark" deeply depicts Xiangzi's inner struggle and despair. This metaphor not only reflected Xiangzi's personal predicament but also implied the oppression and helplessness faced by people at the bottom of society at that time. However, in the translation, although "beast trapped in darkness" roughly conveys the image of the original text, there may be differences in the symbolic significance of the image of "beast" in Eastern and Western cultures, leading to the deviation in the understanding of readers [8]. In addition, the complex psychological process of "eager to break the shackles, but unable to find a way out" in the original text is also simplified to "yearning to break free but unable to find a way out" in the translation and this simplified treatment may not be able to fully convey the profound connotation and emotional power of the original text.

Example 4: 这些人，生命最鲜壮的时期已经卖掉，现在再把窝窝头变成的血汗滴在马路上。又忍了一会儿，他睁开了眼，肚中响了一阵，觉出点饿来。极慢地立起来，找了个混沌挑儿。虎妞很高兴。她张罗着煮元宵，包饺子，白天逛庙，晚上逛灯 [2]。

Translation: These people, having sold the prime of their lives, now poured the sweat and blood of their steamed buns onto the roads. He endured for a while longer, then opened his eyes. His stomach growled, and he felt a pang of hunger. Rising slowly, he searched for a street vendor selling wontons. Tiger Girl was delighted. She arranged to

cook sweet dumplings, make stuffed dumplings, and visit temples during the day and lantern festivals at night [3].

From the perspective of cultural transmission, Wowtou, Chaos, and Yuanxiao, as traditional Chinese food, not only carry rich food culture but also deeply reflect the social and economic conditions and people's living habits at that time. The names of these foods themselves are very rich in cultural images, which is an important clue to understanding the background of the works and the life state of the characters. However, He simply replaced these words with profound cultural connotations with "steamed cakes" and "little round rice balls", which may be more familiar to American readers. He even omitted the translation of Wowtou, which undoubtedly weakened the cultural characteristics of the original text and made it difficult for foreign readers to accurately grasp the cultural essence of the original work.

From the perspective of context adaptation, translation is not only the replacement of words but also the reconstruction of context. In *Camel Xiangzi*, the emergence of these food words is often closely linked to Xiangzi's life predicament, social status, and emotional state. For example, the expression "the blood and sweat drops that become on the road" not only depicts the scene of Xiangzi's hard work but also implies his helplessness and struggle for life. However, Evan Kin's translation fails to fully reflect the deep meaning in this context, which makes the translation appear pale in expression.

From the perspective of translation ethics, the translator has the responsibility to be faithful to the original text and to respect and convey the cultural value of the original text. In the process of translation, Evan kin chose words that are easily acceptable to American readers to replace the Chinese food in the original text; although it may be considered to improve the readability of the translation, but this practice somewhat violates the basic principles of translation — fidelity. It not only fails to accurately convey the cultural information of the original text but also may mislead the reader's understanding of the original text, damaging the integrity and cultural value of the original text.

## 2.2 Culture dimension

Language is the carrier of culture and a specific part of a culture [9]. The process of globalization and international cultural exchanges have become more and more important to the study of literary translation from a cultural perspective. Culture are equal, so should intercultural translation, but it is often not the case. In order to cater to target language readers, translators adopt the strategy of domestication to erase differences and replace culture-loaded words in the source novel with objects they are familiar with and

language principles they are used to. As a result, cultural loss is inevitable. Divided into two sections, this part will analyze the cultural loss in Evan Kin's translation *Rickshaw Boy* from two cultural categories, namely religious culture conflict and social culture conflict.

### 2.2.1 Religious culture conflict

Translating *Camel Xiangzi*, a literary work full of culturally loaded words and expressions, is bound to be a clash between the source language culture and target language culture [9]. Religious culture is an important part of human civilization, which will have a certain impact on people's ideology and attitude towards life. Different countries have different religious beliefs. In Western countries, Christianity is the most mainstream, including Orthodox Christianity, Protestantism, and Catholicism. In the East, people generally believe in Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam. There are many words in *Camel Xiangzi* that can reflect the religion that Chinese people believe in.

Example 1: 虎妞着了慌，到娘娘庙，求了个神方 [2]。

Translation: Tiger Girl was beside herself with fear. At the Temple to the Goddess of Mercy she besought from the spirits of the other world.....[3]

“娘娘庙”(Niangniang Miao) refers to the "land goddess" in China folklore. According to legend, it originated when Shun Di went south and was later built in various parts of China. It belongs to Taoist culture and reflects the rich historical culture and folk beliefs in various parts of China. However, In Evan Kin's translation, he translated the“娘娘庙” in the original into “Temple to the Goddess of Mercy”[3]. The translation of “Temple to the Goddess of Mercy” is added with a little Christian color, which has worn away the “earthy” flavor of the original text. There are totally different religious systems and beliefs in Chinese and Western cultures. How translators translate the contents about religious culture will directly affect the spread of the culture in the source country. This domestication weakened the expression of cultural factors to some extent. At the same time, it hindered the spread of China's religious culture to the world.

Example 2: 买卖过人口，放过阎王账。

街上越来越热闹了，祭灶的糖瓜摆满了街...[2]

China mainly believes in Buddhism, while the United States believes in Christianity. Evan Kin's translation of “Yan Wang” is “devil”; The translation of “offering sacrifices to the kitchen” is “honor the Kitchen God”. Evidently, Evan Kin has arrogantly replaced the religion of Chinese people with Christianity on more than one occasion. The result is the loss of religious and cultural connotations of the source language. From the post-colonial perspective, Evan Kin was obviously influenced by a strong culture and made a “deviation” from the original

work. Translation becomes a vassal of ideology, which is naturally sad, but it is often unavoidable [10].

### 2.2.2 Social Culture Conflict

The taboo of “sex” is inherent in Chinese traditional culture. China has advocated implicature since ancient times. In writing and translation, consciously or semi-consciously using euphemisms to express taboo things has become one of the figures of speech in Chinese articles [5]. This rhetorical device can be noticed in both Lao She’s novel and Lynette Shi’s translation.

Lao She, as a master of literary language in China, is good at depicting plots in simple and concise language and can fully convey characters’ feelings in such concise sentences. For example, in the plot of Tigress and Xiangzi’s first night, Lao She only made a simple hint with “the lights went out in the room” and some environmental description(屋内灭了灯。天上很黑。不时有一两个星刺入星河,或扫进黑暗中,带着发红或发白的光尾 [2]). Compared with the euphemistic description in the original work, however, Evan Kin’s exaggerated and explicit expression greatly catered to the psychology of the American public at that time.

In the forties and fifties of the 20th century, the United States was in the climax stage of the development of the “sexual revolution”, and the sexual liberation movement was the mainstream of American society [10]. Due to cultural differences, the obscure sexual description in the original text was clarified and concretized in Kin’s pen. In terms of postcolonial theory, texts from weak cultures are often ignored by strong cultures, and they are often reinterpreted.

Example: 家里的不是个老婆,而是个吸人血的妖精 [2]。

Translation: It was no proper wife who awaited him there, but an old bitch possessed of the spirit of the she-wolf who steals at night into the dark chambers of lonely men and sucks men empty, drinking so deep of their manhood that the well-runs dry, and they wander through the rest of their time staring vacantly at the world about them and mumbling to themselves[3].

In Lao She’s original text, he sorely used the word “demon” to describe Tigress. This is an image in China’s mythology. The “goblin” in Chinese mythology refers to the cultivated things, just like the cultivation of immortals. Demons can also be divided into good and bad, even if they are demons, if they have good thoughts, they can be cultivated into positive results; if people have evil thoughts, they will degenerate into demons. In Evan Kin’s translation, he added many detailed descriptions to explain the hidden meaning of sex in the phrase “goblin”. He described in great detail what Tigress did to Xiangzi to

illustrate Tigress’s evil.

What’s more, Kin added more than 200 words to the description of Xiangzi’s first visit to Tigress’s house, and the sexual fear of Xiangzi and Tigress after their marriage was also described in detail [11]. Xiao Fuzi’s forced prostitution was briefly mentioned in the original work, but Kin did a lot of embellishment in the translation[10]. Words are bold and explicit, such as “open up the portal of her womanhood [3]” and “lay down her body and spread her legs [3].”

Obviously, this is a rewriting made by the translator to cater to American readers, which not only highlights the differences between Chinese and American cultures in dealing with sexual issues but also becomes a gimmick to attract readers. It was also a gimmick for publishing and selling, which can be seen from the sensation of *Camel Xiangzi* after its release in the United States. Therefore, Evan Kin’s behavior is a compromise of the expectations and social psychology of the target language readers, which reflects the social and cultural conflict between China and the West, and may cause readers in English-speaking countries to have a biased understanding of the character and quality of China people.

## 3. Rewriting the ending

The translator’s behavior is influenced by strong cultural ideology. Being a translator from a strong culture, Evan Kin rewrote the tragic ending of the novel into a comedy ending. At the end of the revision, Xiangzi successfully saved Xiao Fuzi, and the two of them rushed to a free and beautiful future.

Example:“体面的,要强的,好梦想的,利己的,个人的,健壮的,伟大的,祥子,不知陪着人家送了多少回殡,不知何时何地会埋起他自己来,埋起这堕落的,自私的,不幸的,社会病胎里的产儿,个人主义的末路鬼!” [2]

Translation: In the mildness of summer evening the burden in his arms stirred slightly, nestling closer to his body as he ran. She was alive. He was alive. They were free [3].

There is a reason why Evan Kin made such changes. In the social and historical environment of the United States at that time, Americans who have just experienced World War II, are particularly concerned about the fate of characters in literary works. They need a more relaxing reading atmosphere. Therefore, the translator deliberately hid the tragedy and suffering in the original novel aiming to comfort the American people who were traumatized in World War II with a happy ending [1].

In fact, after the publication of the original, many readers questioned: “Xiangzi, who worked so hard, still ended in misfortune, how can we have hope for the future?” [12]

virtually, the tragic ending is exactly what Lao She meant. The tragic power of *Camel Xiangzi* lies in that it not only arouses people's sympathy for Xiangzi's unfortunate experience in his life, but also causes people's deeper thinking—in order not to repeat Xiangzi's tragedy, it is necessary to change the unreasonable social system[11].

Whereas, it doesn't seem to matter for American readers. As it can be said, the rewriting of Xiangzi's image is the result of conforming to the American personal heroic expectation vision. Xiangzi is pragmatic and independent, self-respecting, following his inner beliefs and controlling his own destiny. This kind of character can naturally get a happy ending in American values[13]. However, this move violates the literary character of the original work and constitutes a certain degree of cultural hegemony. Hence, King got criticism from numerous scholars, researchers and even Lao She, writer of *Camel Xiangzi*[9].

#### 4. Conclusion

Through the research, we found that Evan Kin simplified and deleted more descriptions of the protagonist Xiangzi, added detailed depictions when it comes to sex, and altered ending of the novel into a happy reunion. His overuse of domestication translation strategy has harmed and infringed on the original novel from the perspective of post-colonial theory. He is one from whom translators can both learn from what he does well and what he fails to do properly. Evan Kin perhaps hoping that more people would understand Chinese literature, and that the experience of Xiangzi in Chinese literature can inspire the American people to recover their spirits after the war. Nevertheless, it is an indisputable fact that his wanton rewriting and deletion caused the loss of Chinese culture embodied in the original novel. It is a pity that a classic work has become a tool for pleasing natives, and that the cultural elements in it have been lost to varying degrees, partly to the point of exhaustion.

In any case, translation is not merely a substitution activity of two languages. It also involves in the expression. In the process of translation, Evan Kin's attitude towards the exotic original work is undesirable from the perspective of cultural diversity. Translators should learn from the criticisms on him that sticking to translation ethnics is of great importance, massive changes to the original, or excessive exertion of translator's subjectivity are not encouraged. Having a responsible translation ethnic is a priority to be a good translator.

The conclusion also serves as an enlightenment to translators all over the world that they should be wary of this post-colonial tendency when translating literature from the Third World. They should strive to restore the regional, linguistic and cultural characteristics of the source

language as originally as possible, instead of over-naturalizing it in the name of fluency and readability, resulting in unnecessary cultural loss as well as the real purpose and significance of translation. Translation is primarily important first in cultural communications, and then in other aspects like artistic and literary appreciation.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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