

# Study on the Cultural Differences between China and the West in the Translation of Culture-loaded Words from the Ecological Translation Theory Perspective: Taking *Love in a Fallen City* as an Example

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## Abstract:

In recent years, to further promote the prosperity of Chinese culture and strengthen China's soft power in culture, many scholars have begun to study the approach of translating culture-loaded words. At the same time, with the development and perfection of translation studies, Ecological Translation Theory has been increasingly applied. *Love in a Fallen City* is a classic work that readers deeply love. With its unique literary style and profound social insights, the work has touched the hearts of countless readers. The novel collection *Love in a Fallen City*, translated by Karen S. Kingsbury, is the most widely known English translation. Therefore, based on the original version and translation of Karen S. Kingsbury, this paper analyzes the culture-loaded words in the translation of Karen S. Kingsbury based on Ecological Translation Theory through many examples to better demonstrate the differences and integration of Chinese and Western culture.

**Keywords:** Eileen Chang; *Love in a Fallen City*; Culture-loaded Words; Ecological Translation Theory; Cultural Differences

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction to the Novel Collection of *Love in a Fallen City*

The novel collection *Love in a Fallen City* [1] is a novel collection written in 1943-1944 by Eileen Chang, a contemporary Chinese writer. First published in July 1991, the novel collection depicts the collision and fusion of traditional and modern, eastern and Western thought and culture, profoundly showing Chang's thoughts and concerns about society. Readers love the novel collection *Love in a Fallen City*, and its English version is also well known to readers, among which Karen S. Kingsbury translates the widely praised version. This paper compares Eileen Chang's novel collection *Love in a Fallen City* and its English version, translated by Karen S. Kingsbury, which was published by Penguin Group, to find out the cultural differences between China and the West. This paper takes the novel collection *Love in a Fallen City* translated by Karen S. Kingsbury [2] as an example published by Penguin Group to compare and analyze the cultural differences between China and the West.

### 1.2 Study Background

In recent years, to further promote the prosperity of Chinese culture and strengthen China's soft power in culture, an increasing number of scholars have begun to conduct research on how to translate multitudinous culture-loaded words legitimately, which promotes the inheritance and dissemination of the spiritual core of Chinese culture. In the translation of the novel collection *Love in a Fallen City*, due to the obvious differences between China and Western countries in history, system, customs, and other aspects, translating the connotation of culture-loaded words is important. At the same time, throughout the latter part of the 20th century, people paid much more attention to the issue of ecological civilization. Under such a world-time background, the interdisciplinary combination of ecological thought and translation theory came into being [3]. Ecological Translation Theory has been increasingly applied with translation studies evolving and becoming more sophisticated. However, according to the data from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), studies on culture-loaded words in *Love in a Fallen City* based on the Ecological Translation Theory are currently scarce.

Moreover, there is almost no relevant literature to research and evaluate the cultural distinctions between China and the West by translating terms of culture-loaded words in the book.

Given the above, this paper takes the translation of terms with culture-loaded words in Chang's novel collection *Love in a Fallen City* and its English version translated by Karen S.Kingsbury as the research object. It analyzes and discusses the different cultural orientations in the original literature and the translated version from the perspective of Ecological Translation Theory, to show the differences between Chinese and Western culture and deepen readers' comprehension of Chinese culture.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Definition and Classification of Culture-loaded Words

Before beginning the subsequent translation studies, it is necessary to define the central concept of this study, referring to the definition of culture-loaded words, to analyze translation strategies and select translation examples based on a clarified definition.

Culture cannot exist without language; language is the carrier of culture and the reflection of culture. Translation activities are carried out around these two interrelated factors. There are obvious differences between China and Western countries regarding historical development, social system, religious beliefs, living habits, and customs. These cultural differences can be reflected in the language level and produce words with cultural characteristics, commonly called "culture-loaded words" [4]. Nowadays, Eugene Nida's classification of culture is generally adopted: Namely ecological culture, material culture, social culture, religious culture, and linguistic culture [5]. Therefore, the author divides the culture-loaded words into five related categories from the cultural level.

### 2.2 Earlier Research on the Translation of Culture-loaded Words in Literary Works

In recent years, with the continuous enhancement of China's cultural soft power, an increasing number of scholars have studied culture-loaded word translation. Meanwhile, considering the advancement of translation theories, current studies on culture-loaded words have emphasized using various theoretical perspectives.

For example, in 2024, based on the Ecological Translation Theory, Yanshan Liu and Jing Li took the English version of *The Classic of Tea* and *the Sequel to the Classic of Tea* as examples, exploring the strategies in the field of translation adopted in the English version of tea culture-loaded words from the cultural dimension of "three-dimensional" transformation, which has reference significance for the

improvement and development of the English version of tea culture-loaded words [6]. In 2023, Miao Zhang and Shuyu Xu analyzed the translation strategies of culture-loaded words in the English version of *My Old Home* according to Skopo's theory, thus reflecting the readability and acceptability of the translation [7]. The studies of these scholars ushered in a new opportunity for research on translation theories and methods of culture-loaded words and promoted the perfection of studies on them.

### 2.3 Problems Existing in the Previous Related Studies

Firstly, there is a lack of comparative studies on the cultural distinctions between China and the West, as shown in *Love in a Fallen City*. In this work, Eileen Chang created a strong atmosphere with Chinese features, but at the same time, impacted it with the habits of Western civilization. Chang tries to find a balance in the work, that is, a kind of aesthetic harmony between Eastern and Western culture, which reflects the fusion and conflict between Chinese and Western culture.

Secondly, as culture-loaded words capture the distinct actions of a nation that have been progressively collected over a lengthy historical process and set it apart from other nations [8], these kinds of words from different cultures can be an important means to reflect cultural differences. However, the current analysis of cultural differences based on culture-loaded words is lacking and needs to be improved.

Finally, according to the summary of the translation theories used in the research on culture-loaded words translation, it is not difficult to figure out that most of the theories guiding the study fail to fully consist of the characteristics of culture-loaded words. In addition to carrying profound cultural connotations, their meanings play a great role in language and communication. However, from some of the previous literature, whether it is the Functional View, Skopos theory, or other translation theories, the study level often has a relatively obvious tendency, and it is unable to comprehensively explore culture-loaded words.

To sum up, this study will deeply explore the cultural connotations of culture-loaded words in Chinese and adopt sensible translation theories to analyze the cultural discrepancies between China and the West reflected in *Love in a Fallen City* to show the collision and integration of Chinese and Western culture.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

Eco-translatology is a new translation theory proposed by Professor Gengshen Hu, who believes that Eco-translatology can be known as an ecological approach to translation studies or translation studies from an ecological perspective [9]. The theory emphasizes the interrelationship

and interaction of translation ecology, text ecology, and “translation community” ecology[10]. Eco-translatology originated from “An Approach to Translation as Adaptation and Selection[11]” proposed by Professor Gengshen Hu in 2004. After more than 20 years of self-actualization, self-validation, self-growth, and self-fulfillment[12], Eco-translatology has progressively grown to be a significant area of study for translation and is known as “the typical representative of contemporary Chinese translation theory discourse[13]”.

The following briefly describes Eco-translatology’s translation principles: “multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptive selection.” It requires translators to consider multiple factors such as linguistic expression, cultural connotations, communicative intention, and aesthetic transformation[3] throughout the translating process to achieve the equivalence between the ecology of the original and the target literature[3]. If the “principles” of translation are regarded as macroscopic guidance, then the “methods” of translation can be regarded as microscopic operations [14]. Based on Ecological Translation Theory’s translation principles, the “three-dimensional transformation” translation method was proposed. It is relatively important to the adaptive transformation of the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions under the principle of “multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptive selection”[14]. The adaptive selection and transformation from the linguistic dimension refers to “translators’ adaptive transformation of linguistic forms in the translation process. This adaptive transformation from linguistic dimension is conducted at diversiform levels and in various elements.” [15] Then, the adaptive transformation from the cultural dimension emphasizes that in the process of translation, the meaning of bilingual culture should be emphasized to understand and transmit[15] and “overcome the obstacles caused by cultural differences while endeavoring to protect the equilibrium and harmony of the cultural ecology of two languages to ensure the realization of information interchange.[10]” Moreover, the adaptive transformation from the communicative dimension requires translators to concentrate on how the translation process adapts bilingual communicative intention.[15] and “to pursue the optimal maintenance of the communicative ecology of both the original and the target work[10]”.

#### 4. Analysis of Cultural Disparities between China and the West under the Perspective of Ecological Translation Theory

Based on the above viewpoints, the author analyzes the cultural disparities between China and the West embodied in culture-loaded words in *Love in a Fallen City* from

three dimensions of Ecological Translation Theory:

##### 4.1 Analysis Based on the Linguistic Dimension of Ecological Translation Theory

ST: 胡琴上的故事是应当由光艳的伶人来搬演的。

TT: A radiant entertainer should perform the tale of the huqin.

“Huqin” is a material culture-loaded word. It is a general term for musical instruments used by ethnic minorities in northern and northwestern China in ancient times. To preserve the ecological environment of the original language, the translator adopted the translation strategy of foreignization so that readers can acquire a profound comprehension of the characteristics of Chinese culture through the ecological form of the original language of musical instrument words.

ST: 今儿当面锣，对面鼓，发过话了，我可没有脸再住下去了！

TT: But now that they’ve beat the drums, banged the gongs, and said it straight out, I’ve lost too much face to go on living here!”

“当面锣，对面鼓” is a Chinese idiom that belongs to the linguistic culture-loaded words. It is a metaphor for discussing or arguing face-to-face. The translator retained the images of “drums” and “gongs” in the translation of this idiom so that the cultural connotations of the culture-loaded words would not be affected by the change of language, which not only retained the original style of Chang’s literature but also made the target readers feel the charm of Chinese idioms.

ST: 我又不是你肚子里的蛔虫。

TT: I can’t read your mind.

“肚里蛔虫” is a Chinese idiom which also belongs to the linguistic culture-loaded words. In Chinese culture, the roundworm is used as a metaphor for being aware of the inner activity of others as it is parasitic in people’s stomachs. However, due to the lack of similar expression in Western culture, the translator omitted the image of “roundworm” and directly used the verb-object phrase “read one’s mind.” The translator adopted the translation strategy of domestication so that the translation could integrate into the ecological environment of the target language familiarly, and the target readers could easily understand its internal meaning. At the same time, it also reflects the differences between Chinese and Western language expression.

##### 4.2 Analysis Based on the Cultural Dimension of Ecological Translation Theory

ST: 宝络这孩子，今年也二十四了，真是我心上一个疙瘩。

TT: This child, Baolu, is twenty-four now, and she’s a knot in my heart.

According to the Modern Chinese Dictionary (6th edition), the word “knot” can be used as a metaphor for a problem that is not easy to solve. For example, The knot in my heart was removed long ago[16]. It is a linguistic culture-loaded word and is often used in local dialects. To ensure that readers comprehend the original literature’s meaning with clarity, the translator chose a translation strategy that adapts to the cultural, ecological environment of the target language, that is, domestication, which breaks down the cultural barriers generated by dialects in cross-cultural communication, and the meantime reflects the true meaning of the word. By restoring the cultural connotation of the word, the translator reflects the disparities between Chinese and Western culture at the linguistic level and enables the target readers to comprehend the cultural connotation of the word easily.

ST: 逼上梁山

TT: I’ve been forced into it.

“逼上梁山” is a Chinese idiom which belongs to the linguistic culture-loaded words. It first came from *Water Margin*, which Naian Shi wrote during the Ming dynasty. “逼上梁山” refers to Chong Lin and many heroes in *Water Margin* who were driven to join the Liangshan Rebels. It’s a metaphor for being forced to rebel or do something. The use of this idiom by Eileen Chang in the novel collection *Love in a Fallen City* shows its meaning with national culture. Still, in the translation, Karen S. Kingsbury adopted the domestication strategy, deleting the image of “Liangshan”. She only used a brief phrase, “be forced into it,” to express the meaning of forced resistance in the original work. Based on the cultural habits of the target readers, this translation strategy makes corresponding adaptive transformation in the cultural dimension, reducing the reading obstacles brought by literary information and reflecting the difference between Chinese and Western ecological and cultural environments.

ST: 家丑不可外扬

TT: Dirty laundry shouldn’t be aired in public.

“家丑不可外扬” belongs to the linguistic culture-loaded words, referring to the problems occurring in the family that need to be solved internally and will be laughed at if told to outsiders. Due to the cultural distinctions between China and the West, the translator adopted the phrase “dirty laundry” to express “家丑,” which refers to the troubles and embarrassments in private life. This translation strategy skillfully finds the concept equivalent to “家丑” in Western culture, which is familiar to the readers. What’s more, it is also conducive for the translator to better convey the ideas of the original work.

#### 4.3 Analysis Based on the Communicative Dimension of Ecological Translation Theory

ST: 你别动不动就拿法律来吓人, 法律呀, 今天改, 明

天改, 我这天理人情, 三纲五常, 可是改不了!

TT: The law is one thing today and another tomorrow. I’m talking about the law of family relations, which never changes!

“三纲五常” belongs to the religious culture-loaded words. “三纲” was first found in the *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals*, written by Zhongshu Dong midway through the Western Han Dynasty. The concept of “五常” comes from the Siduan Theory of Mencius. “三纲五常” was first proposed by Rong Ma in the Eastern Han Dynasty, of which “三纲” refers to the interpersonal relationship between father and son, king and minister, husband and wife, while “五常” refers to the five permanent nature of human beings: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness. According to the communicative dimension, the translator adopted the translation strategy of domestication, made the adaptive selection, combined with the story plot and the ecological environment of the original work, and strived to overcome the cultural differences between the two languages so as to better convey the communicative intention of the original work.

ST: 天生的扫帚星!

TT: A real bad-luck comet, that one!

“扫帚星” belongs to the linguistic culture-loaded words; in Chinese folklore, “扫星” is a folk term for “comet”, which will cause war or natural disasters. The modern understanding of the word means someone who brings disaster or bad luck, which is an abusive term mainly aimed at women. In the West, comets are considered the symbol of death and evil. Instead of using the word “broom” in English, the translator retained the image of “comet” and changed the modifier to “bad luck.” The domestication strategy reflects the original work’s connotation more directly, which is beneficial to breaking down the barriers of cultural differences and provides the intended audience with a thorough and clear understanding of the original literature’s communicative goal.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 Major Findings and Implications

From the comparative analysis of the three dimensions of Ecological Translation Theory, the author figures out that the English version translated by Karen S. Kingsbury is well applied to the translation ecological environment of both the subject and the object. Meanwhile, the translator adopted several translation strategies such as domestication and foreignization to cope with the translation of various culture-loaded words and adaptively select and transform them while retaining the connotation of Chinese culture, which translates culture-loaded words bring better reading experience to target readers. The study proves

that the translation principle of multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptive selection and the translation method of three-dimensional transformation in the Ecological Translation Theory can effectively guide the study of cultural distinctions between China and Western countries based on culture-loaded words. In addition, according to the Ecological Translation Theory, this paper takes *Love in a Fallen City* and Karen S.Kingsbury's translation as examples and analyzes the cultural distinctions between China and the West shown in the translation of culture-loaded words, which has complementary significance for related studies.

### 5.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Due to the author's knowledge level limitations, this paper still has some shortcomings. In the study process, the author only analyzed some of the translation cases of culture-loaded words in the novel collection *Love in a Fallen City* but did not analyze them one by one according to the five categories of culture-loaded words proposed by the author in the paper. Therefore, the summarized analysis of the cultural differences between China and the West based on translating culture-loaded words lacks comprehensiveness and needs improvement. In future studies, the author will further explore the above problems and shortcomings based on this study, hoping to deepen the understanding of the differences between Chinese and Western cultural systems through translation comparison and reflect the communication and collision between Chinese and Western cultures.

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