

# Strategies for Translating Idioms between English and Chinese from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

Zhang Kaifeng

(Xi'an Translation Institute Xi'an Shaanxi 710100)

**Abstract:** This paper examines how proverbs can be translated from one language and culture to another through a cross-cultural perspective, aiming to achieve an accepted translation that facilitates smooth intercultural communication. Due to cultural differences, the background and conveyed meaning of proverbs also vary. Therefore, when translating English and Chinese proverbs, translators should have a comprehensive understanding of the disparities between Eastern and Western cultures. They should employ appropriate strategies such as domestication and foreignization, as well as complementary approaches, in order to fully embody the cultural connotations and characteristics of English and Chinese proverbs, and to achieve the communicative function of translation.

**Keywords:** proverbs; translation strategies; domestication and foreignization.

## 1. Introduction

Proverbs are treasures and essence of a language, representing a common form of expression in folk culture and everyday life. They are popular, concise, and memorable, gradually becoming an indispensable part of national mainstream culture. Proverbs reflect a nation's religious beliefs, cultural traditions, values, thinking patterns, customs, and more, containing rich cultural connotations. Different cultural connotations pose a major obstacle in translating proverbs. Therefore, cross-cultural understanding becomes a key factor in the success or failure of proverb translation. How translators accurately translate English and Chinese proverbs and ensure widespread acceptance among readers is an extremely challenging task. This requires translators to have an understanding of different cultural backgrounds, as well as find appropriate vocabulary and the best translation methods within the context of proverbial culture.

## 2. Cultural Comparison of Chinese and English Idioms

Language is the carrier of culture, and without language, there would be no culture. Language is influenced by culture and reflects cultural aspects. English linguist John Lyons once said, "The differences in words in each language reflect the important cultural characteristics of the society using that language, including things, customs, and various activities." Idioms, as the essence of language, summarize and encapsulate the everyday life experiences of a nation's people, reflecting the rich cultural connotations of a nation. As a form of language, the unique charm of idioms lies in the fact that

they represent the essence of national culture, reflecting both the distinctive characteristics and commonalities of a nation's culture. The Chinese and English nations, influenced by different geographical environments, historical cultures, customs, values, aesthetic habits, religious beliefs, and social systems, have significant differences in the content covered by their idioms. China, being primarily a continental country that relied on agriculture for livelihood in the past, has many agricultural proverbs that have been passed down through generations and become an integral part of the Chinese language. For example, "留得青山在, 不怕没柴烧" translates into "While green mountains exist, there is no need to worry about wood" in English. "种瓜得瓜, 种豆得豆" expresses the idea that farmers will harvest what they sow and can be translated as "As a man sows, so he shall reap" in English. On the other hand, as the United Kingdom is an island nation with a prosperous maritime industry, many English idioms are related to the sea. For example, "In a calm sea, every man is a pilot" can be translated as "海面平静, 人人可以当舵手" in Chinese. The English idiom "Love is blind" originates from the Western mythology of Cupid or the ancient Greek god Eros (also known as the blind God), while its corresponding Chinese idiom "情人眼里出西施" carries clear traces of Han ethnic history and culture. Without understanding the cultural differences, translating "Love is blind" as "爱情是盲目的" would lack cultural significance and lose its original poetic flavor. Therefore, in order to accurately understand and grasp the rich and unique

connotations bestowed upon Chinese and English idioms by their respective cultures, a thorough exploration and research of cultural differences is necessary for the proper translation of idioms between English and Chinese. Only by fully understanding the cultural differences between English and Chinese can translators accurately grasp the true essence and unique connotations of idioms in both languages, and translate them correctly and reasonably, achieving the desired goal of cross-cultural communication.

### 3. Strategies for translating idioms between Chinese and English

#### 3.1 Domestication Strategy

The domestication strategy aims to adapt the target language to the cultural context of the source language as much as possible. It focuses on capturing the cultural connotations and essence of the source language idioms, while changing the language form and imagery to flexibly use similar expressions in the target language to convey the intended meaning of the idioms. Domestication requires the translation to fully comply with the norms of the target language, freeing it from the constraints of the original form and changing any expressions that may seem unfamiliar to the target language readers into authentic expressions of the target language. Domestication can also be understood as an interpretation of cultural characteristics. By employing this strategy, not only does it adhere to the cultural connotations of the source language, but it also enables readers to understand the traditional cultural background of the target language, facilitating cross-cultural communication.

For example, when translating the Chinese idiom "塞翁失马, 焉知非福" directly as "When the old man on the frontier lost his mare, who could have suggested it was a blessing in disguise?" it would lack interest, be difficult to comprehend, and fail to convey the cultural background to Western readers. However, using the domestication strategy, we can find the corresponding English idiom "A loss may turn out to be a gain." This translation clearly conveys the underlying meaning of the idiom, is concise and readily understandable, and achieves the desired effect of cross-cultural communication. Another example is translating the English idiom "as timid as a hare" into Chinese as "胆小如鼠," which accurately conveys the intended meaning within the cultural context since, in Western culture, hares symbolize timidity, while in Chinese culture, hares symbolize gentleness, alertness, and agility rather than timidity. Thus, by adhering to the requirements of the cultural context, we can

accurately utilize domestication to translate this idiom. Similar examples of domesticated translations of idioms include "挂羊头, 卖狗肉" translated as "cry up wine and sell vinegar" in English and "One boy is a boy, two boys half a boy, three boys no boy" translated as "一个和尚挑水吃, 两个和尚抬水吃, 三个和尚没水吃" in Chinese. These idioms all employ the domestication strategy and result in translations that are authentic, concise, lively, and easily understood by readers of the target language.

#### 3.2 Foreignization Strategy

The foreignization strategy, as identified by Italian-American scholar Lawrence Venuti, involves accepting the linguistic and cultural differences of foreign language texts, thus introducing readers to foreign contexts and cultural perspectives. When translating idioms between English and Chinese using the foreignization strategy, the cultural values and characteristics of the source language idiom are emphasized, taking the readers directly into the scenario of the idiom to provide them with a more explicit understanding of the rhetorical devices employed in the original idiom. This preserves the cultural aspects and exotic flavor of the source language idiom, thereby offering readers a great sense of satisfaction.

For example, if translated directly, the English idiom "The water that bears the boat is the same that swallows it up" becomes "水既能载船也能把船打翻" in Chinese. While the meaning is conveyed, the translation lacks the poetic charm. However, if the translator is familiar with Chinese history and culture and knows that Emperor Li Shimin of the Tang Dynasty once said, "水能载舟, 亦能覆舟," then they can aptly use this famous saying to translate the intended meaning of the English idiom. Another example is the English idiom "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven." If translated directly as "宁为地狱主, 不做天堂仆," it may appear too Westernized since Chinese speakers generally do not use terms like "地狱" and "天堂." In such cases of differing cultural connotations between Chinese and Western cultures, it is possible to utilize the foreignization strategy to translate the English idiom into an idiomatic expression that is acceptable to the target language readers. The Chinese idiom "宁当鸡头, 不做凤尾" aligns perfectly with the intended meaning of the English idiom and serves as an appropriate translation. Similarly, when translating the Chinese idiom "道高一尺, 魔高一丈" into English, the foreignization strategy can be used to translate it as "While the priest climbs a post, the devil climbs ten." Since there is

no equivalent term for "道士" (Taoist priest) in English, translating it as "priest" in the cultural context of English can both preserve the cultural imagery of the source language idiom and introduce Chinese culture into English culture, providing target language readers with a more accurate understanding of Chinese culture.

Therefore, by employing the foreignization strategy, the cultural imagery and national characteristics of the source language are preserved, while foreign cultures are introduced to the target language, offering a fresh perspective. In today's era of cross-cultural communication, readers should be receptive to this translation approach.

### 3.3 Integration of Domestication and Foreignization

The integration of domestication and foreignization is a translation method that combines the two strategies, complementing each other. When translating idioms, we often encounter a dilemma between "striving for easy comprehension" and "preserving the original style and essence." Some argue for complete domestication to cater to the psychological habits of target language readers, while others advocate for foreignization to retain the "foreign flavor" and cultural characteristics of the source text. However, both extreme approaches have their limitations since both domestication and foreignization serve the same purpose: to make the translated work more authentic and comprehensive, resulting in the best possible translation and achieving the desired effect of cross-cultural communication.

In the process of foreignization translation, translators often come across idioms with few words but profound allusions or anecdotes. In such cases, the translator needs to employ the integration of domestication and foreignization. For example, the English idiom "Tom is a wolf in sheep's clothing" can be directly translated using domestication as "汤姆是披着羊皮的狼" in Chinese. However, this translation may lead readers to believe that Tom appears gentle on the outside but is cruel like a wolf, deviating from the intended meaning of the source idiom. Therefore, by integrating domestication and foreignization, the translation can be rendered as "汤姆像披着羊皮的狼,是一个外强中干的人," which accurately conveys the intended meaning of the idiom without being easily misunderstood by readers. Another example is the English idiom "He is shedding crocodile tears." Using domestication, it can be translated as "他流着鳄鱼的眼泪." However, this translation

may not be fully understood by readers. By applying the foreignization strategy and supplementing it with "猫哭耗子假慈悲" (the cat cries while targeting a mouse), target language readers can easily grasp the meaning of this idiom while also learning an interesting cultural fact about crocodile tears. This approach achieves two outcomes simultaneously and provides readers with a cross-cultural experience.

In conclusion, domestication and foreignization should complement each other in translation. When translating idioms between Chinese and English, incorporating both strategies allows readers to appreciate exotic charm without being left confused and unable to comprehend the intended meaning.

### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, idioms are a part of language, and language is a carrier of culture. The process of translating idioms between English and Chinese is a process of cross-cultural communication between the two nations. When translating idioms, it is necessary to consider the specific cultural context and overcome the negative impacts brought by cultural differences. Selective use of domestication, foreignization, and the integration of both strategies can ensure effective communication and achieve the desired effect of cross-cultural communication for readers with different cultural backgrounds.

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