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## Translation of Culture-Loaded Words in the Ci-Poem *Turn of Zui Hua Yin* From the Perspective of Meaning in Semantics

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### Abstract

Ci-poetry holds an important position in spreading Chinese literature and cross-cultural communication. It contains many culture-loaded words and because of this, the accurate translation of the meaning becomes a barrier during Ci-poetry rendering. This thesis is conducted from the perspective of the theory of meaning stated by Jeffery Leech in Semantics and selects *Turn of Zui Hua Yin* written by Li Qingzhao, a female poet in Song Dynasty, as a case study, placing its culture-loaded words into three categories according to the differences of their conceptual and associative meaning in Chinese and English cultures. Then, in each category, this thesis comparatively analyses the translation of the culture-loaded words in four English versions from Xu Yuan-zhong, Ding Zuxin, Kenneth Rexroth, and Gong Jinghao, and finally concludes proper translation methods and merits and demerits of each version at this point.

**Key words:** Culture-loaded words; Meaning in semantics' Ci-poetry' *Turn of Zui Hua Yin*; Translation

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### INTRODUCTION

Ci-poetry, as a unique literary genre, represents the particular beauty of Chinese culture; what's more, it can express exquisite emotions and thoughts.

In 1841, James Legge began a translation in many volumes of the Chinese classics, a monumental task admirably executed and completed a few years before his death, which was named as *The Chinese Classic*. From then on, more and more English versions of Ci-poetry rendered by foreign scholars emerged, such as *Gems of Chinese Literature* by Herbert A. Giles, *100 Poems from the Chinese* by Kenneth Rexroth, *A Golden Treasury of Chinese Poetry* by John Turner.

Besides, many Chinese scholars also made a great contribution towards the translation of Ci-poetry, including *An English Version of Classic Poems* by Weng Xiangliang, *Bilingual Edition 300 Song Lyrics* by Xu Yuan-Zhong, *An Anthology of Chinese Poetry* by Ding Zuxin, *Selected Poems and Essays of the Tang and Song Dynasties* by Mr. and Mrs. Yang Xianyi, etc..

Nevertheless, some unmerited barriers appeared along with Ci-poetry translation. Among them, the ultimate and noticeable one is how to translate its culture-loaded words properly. More concretely, the conceptual meaning and associative meaning of culture-loaded words in Ci-poetry should be heeded sufficiently. This thesis chooses *Turn of Zui Hua Yin* written by Li Qingzhao, a female poet in Song Dynasty, as a case study, which can typically represent the characteristics of the culture-loaded words in Ci-poetry. By a comparative analysis of the various selected English versions under the guidance of the theory of meaning in semantics, the thesis mainly aims to wake translators' consciousness of importance of the theory of meaning during translating culture-loaded words in Ci-poetry into English: When rendering Ci-poetry, consider the proper meaning and cultural elements of the culture-loaded words as comprehensively as possible; when commenting on others' versions, never affirm or negate across-the-board but compare and analyze the different versions so as to find out a most appropriate way to render the culture-loaded words with the minimal loss of their associative meaning.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1 The Theory of Meaning

During the long history of semantics, the least known area in linguistics, meaning has always been a central topic in human scholarship and defined variously by different schools. C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards presented a “representative list of the main definitions which reputable students of meaning have favored” in their book *The Meaning of Meaning* written in 1923. There are 16 major categories of meaning, with sub-categories all together, numbering 22.

On the basis of the previous researches, Geoffrey N. Leech in a more moderate and objective tone recognizes 7 types of meaning: (a) conceptual meaning; (b) connotative meaning; (c) social meaning; (d) affective meaning; (e) reflected meaning; (f) collocative meaning; and (g) thematic meaning (Leech, 1981, pp.9-23). Leech’s theory places the research of meaning under the macroscopical background of social culture and gives prominence to its communicative functions and communicative values. The more concrete and detailed information of 7 types of meaning is presented in the following table:

**Table 1**  
**The More Concrete and Detailed Information of 7 Types of Meaning (Leech, 1981, p.23)**

|                                |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| 1. Conceptual meaning or Sense | Logical, cognitive, or denotative content.  |
| Associative meaning            |   |
| 2. Connotative meaning         | What is communicated by virtue of what language refers to.  |
| 3. Social meaning              | What is communicated of the social circumstances of language use.   |
| 4. Affective meaning           | What is communicated of the feelings and attitudes of the speaker/writer.                                   |
| 5. Reflected meaning           | What is communicated through association with another sense of the same expression.                         |
| 6. Collocative meaning         | What is communicated through association with words which tend to occur in the environment of another word. |
| 7. Thematic meaning            | What is communicated by the way in which the message is organized in terms of order and emphasis.           |

### 1.2 Culture-Loaded Words

Mona Baker provides a clear definition of culture-loaded words,

The source language word may express a concept which is totally unknown in the target culture. The concept in question may be abstract or concrete; it may relate to a religious belief, a social custom, or even a type of food. Such concepts are often referred to as “culture-specific”.

With differences in ecological environment, religious perception, social institution, historical background, personal experience, thinking pattern and so forth, people of different nations have developed their own cultures,

which can be reflected in the language. Here, all the rich cultural elements can be recapitulated as “associative meaning” that is mentioned above. Therefore, culture-loaded words can be defined as the words loaded with abundant cultural meanings and mirroring the features of the culture of a certain language community, namely, the different distinctions between objects and concepts owing to their own cultures.

Language is a social phenomenon, representing an entirely different culture. During the process of translation, both language and culture should be taken into consideration in order to convey all the information that language carries as much as possible, including cultural information. Successful rendering of culture-loaded words is quite difficult, not only due to their various conceptual meanings, but also because of their different cultural elements or complicated associative meaning. In John Dryden’s opinion, in general, the most feasible way is to process between two extremes, viz. literal translation and liberal/free translation. Likewise, in the book *Essay on the Principles of Translation*, Alexander Tytlor, a famous linguist, says that the perfect situation could probably exist between the two ends.

In conclusion, when dealing with the translation of culture-loaded words in Ci-poetry, translators should seek for a balanceable and modest method, not merely adopting liberal or literal translation, or domesticating or foreignizing translation.

## 2. CASE STUDY: COMPARISON OF VARIOUS VERSIONS OF *TURN OF ZUI HUA YIN*

### 2.1 Introduction to Li Qingzhao and *Turn of Zui Hua Yin*

Li Qingzhao is the most famous, popular and beloved woman writer of Ci-poetry in Song Dynasty. She is considered to be a critical representative and also the terminator of the Gentle and Restrained School of Ci-poetry, which is focus on being cultured and restrained and the determined tones, characterized by morbidezza, lyricism, classicalism, and rejuvenation of people’s real nature, namely secularity and individuality.

As for the style of Li Qingzhao’s Ci-poems, it not merely has the features of the Gentle and Restrained School, what’s more, it is so unique and impressive as to form a new genre named *Yi’an Style*. Harmonious syllables and repeated verses are regarded as a lingering charm in her poems, as if nacreous pearls are dropping down onto a jade plate, which indicates the beauty of sound. Meanwhile, the language in her works is very common and simple, fresh and clear, original and delicate, spontaneous and frank. And the most noticeable point is that Li Qingzhao applies plenty of colloquial words and expressions with ease and makes the best of rhetorical devices, such as simile, metaphor, personification,

allusion, etc.. All of these can most embody Chinese and its regional cultural meanings. That is to say the application of culture-loaded words is a significant and remarkable characteristic of Li Qingzhao's Ci-poems, and is noteworthy in translation into English.

*Turn of Zui Hua Yin* is a most typical one of Li Qingzhao's Ci-poems during her early years of her marriage, in which the emotion is not as luminous and lucid as the ones before her marriage, such as *Turn: Like a Dream* and *Turn: Rouged Lips*, and neither as mournful and lonely as the ones during her late years, a period of political turmoil, the first husband Zhao Mingcheng's death, a short-lived and unhappy second marriage, and many other shocks as well as much hardship. *Turn of Zui Hua Yin* was written on a Double-Ninth Day during the departure with Zhao Mingcheng, while he served as an official in a distant province. So the theme of this poem is missing and mourning for her absent lover, expressing her sorrow and melancholy of parting. Furthermore, the images are fresh and original, worthy of ruminating over.

## 2.2 Analysis of Various Versions of *Turn of Zui Hua Yin*

The culture-loaded words in translating Ci-poetry can be generally classified into three categories. In each category, the various versions will be compared and analyzed respectively. (A few words about the examples: X, D, K and G respectively represent the versions of Xu Yuanzhong, Ding Zuxin, Kenneth Rexroth, and Gong Jinghao)

### 2.2.1 Words With Same Conceptual Meaning and Parallel Associative Meaning

More detailedly, this category refers to the conceptual meaning of words exists in both Chinese and English culture, but their associative meaning is not entirely identical, but partly overlaps. In this case, translators can find the approximate equivalents in the target language or corresponding referents in western culture.

#### Ex.1 莫道不销魂

X: Say not my *soul*

Is not consumed.

D: Do not say: *overwhelmed with sorrow*.

That's nothing.

K: And carries away my *soul*.

G: Do not say *one* is not thrilled.

“魂” is a concept very closely to religion and metaphysics of many cultures or nations. Chinese Taoism believes that “魂” is a special substance with consciousness, can pass into or out of one's body and still live on after one's death. In English, “soul” may be the counterpart having the similar associative meaning. In the Bible, “soul” for humans means the inner self that has thoughts, sensibility and personality. In short, both “魂” and “soul” are the words loaded with religious element, referring to the immaterial part of a person, only having some minor differences in religious belief. This original intends to express the author's deep feeling, just like her

soul disengaging from her body. Hereupon, version X and K are acceptable, which choose “soul” to deliver not only the proper literal meaning but also the associative meaning caused by the religious element. While D adopts free translation to express the basic meaning, but cannot embody its religious culture; furthermore, it expands the length of the translation and destroys the original's form—the economical use of words. In regard to G, the word “one” can be apprehended as a person, someone's heart or other things, which cannot felicitously convey the associative meaning of “魂”, either.

#### Ex.2 玉枕纱橱

X: In silken bed curtain, on *pillow smooth like jade*.

D: My cotton bed curtains,  
My *porcelain pillow* at midnight.

K: At midnight my *jeweled pillow*  
And gauze-curtained bed

G: The green muslin summer bed.

Actually, “玉枕” doesn't mean a pillow made by jade (a hard stone that is usually green and is used in making ornaments, etc.), but porcelain (a hard white shiny substance made by baking clay and used for making delicate cups, plates and ornaments). It is investigated that “玉枕” should be the Greenish White Porcelain pillow of Song Dynasty that is a special kind of Chinese old-age porcelain and popular summertime bedclothes, making people feel refreshing and avoid heat-stroke. Thus, people of the time addressed Greenish White Porcelain as “fake jade”. If “玉枕” is directly rendered into “jade pillow”, it must cause misunderstanding that the pillow is made by jade. So X and D are acceptable—the former uses “smooth like jade” to indicate “玉枕” just has the same features as jade and not equal; the latter adopts free translation skill to point out what its nature is—both versions notice the minor difference of the associative meaning between Chinese and English so as to give the target readers most accurate meaning of the culture-loaded word. Nevertheless, K uses “jeweled pillow” that broadens the meaning and may cause a warp in understanding, because “jeweled” means “a precious stone such as a diamond, ruby, etc.”. And G is more unreasonable, which directly omits the word and changes the meaning of the original, violating the basic principle of translation—faithfulness.

### 2.2.2 Words With Same Conceptual Meaning and Different Associative Meaning

Many objects or concepts do exist in different language cultures, but owing to social conventions, personal experience or feelings, physical environment and other elements, the associative meaning of the same culture-loaded words will vary a lot. To render these words correctly, translators should have a good command of both cultures and comprehend the associative meaning very well.

Ex.1 帘卷西风

- X: Should the *west wind* uproll the curtain of my bower.  
D: But it wears you out, in this *western wind*.  
K: The *West Wind* blows the curtains.  
G: With the door-curtains flapping in the *west wind*.

This is the case that different geographic environments cause different associative meaning of the words with identical conceptual meaning. In terms of geography and climate, “西风”/ “west wind” implies autumn or winter in China, while the coming of spring in the west. As a result, it means melancholy, dismal or loneliness in Chinese culture, whereas hope, lifeblood and optimism in western culture. For instance, *Ode to the west wind* by Percy Bysshe Shelley is a poem to admire the free and innovative spirit of the west wind; otherwise, in a Chinese Qu-poem named *To the Turn of Tian Jing Sha* by Ma Zhiyuan the west wind indicates the nostalgia and loneliness of a traveler. All the four versions above almost translate “西风” into the “west/western wind”. Although with the development of globalization, many westerners have known the different associative meaning of “西风”, there are still a number of people without the special cultural background puzzling that why Li Qingzhao chose “west wind”, such a hopeful image in this Ci-poem in which the setting is in a bleak autumn and the theme is the sadness of missing her husband. Therefore, it is better to render this word by adding an annotation to explain the different associative meaning and avert western readers’ confusion.

Ex.2 人比黄花瘦

- X: You’ll see a face thinner than *yellow flower*.  
D: See! I am frailer than the *chrysanthemums*.  
K: And I am frailer than the *yellow chrysanthemums*.  
G: One is thinner than the *yellow flowers*.

The conceptual meaning of “黄花” is “chrysanthemum”, a large and brightly garden flower that is shaped like a ball and made up of many long narrow petals, and its prefix “chryso-” means a golden color. “Chrysanthemum” does exist in both Chinese and English cultures, yet its associative meaning distinguishes from each other. In China, “chrysanthemum” is a symbol of nobleness, reclusion and unyielding character, which is under the favor of numerous Chinese literati. For instance, “满地黄花堆积。憔悴损，而今有谁堪摘？(Chrysanthemums yellow the ground. They wither, they hand their heads. Who will love them for their delicacy, who will pluck them for their beauty?)” an extract from another Ci-poem *To the Turn of Sheng Sheng Man* written by Li Qingzhao. Otherwise, in English culture Chrysanthemums do not have the above associative meaning, but just a kind of flower used in funeral or cemetery. Comparatively speaking, among the four translations, X is a little inferior to the other three, because “yellow flower” is somewhat vague and not

specific, since it may easily mislead the target readers bethink of any flower of yellow color, such as yellow roses or daffodils. However, the other three apply to the methods of free translation and free translation with annotation, but the associative meaning of the culture-loaded word “黄花”/ “chrysanthemum” cannot be delivered yet. Therefore, it is more considerate to add a footnote to explicit the different associative meaning of chrysanthemum in Chinese culture in order to remove the target readers’ confusion and make them feel the same with the author.

### 2.2.3 Culture Vacancy

In short, culture vacancy refers to the phenomena of lingual culture of nation A do not exist in nation B. A sociologist named Pitirim A. Sorokin says, “Culture vacancy is caused by the things existing in source language but misapprehensive, unintelligible and intangible to the receivers of another community”. In other words, culture vacancy means associative meaning or conceptual meaning of some words are only in one culture.

Ex.1 佳节又重阳

- X: The *Double Ninth* comes again.  
D: Ah, *Double-Ninth Festival* comes again.  
K: Again it is *the Ninth of the Ninth Month*.  
G: T is *Double Night Day* again (The ninth day of the ninth lunar month, a day to climb a hill.)

“重阳” is a traditional festival of China on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, which originated from Han Dynasty. In *The Changes*, number Nine means *Yang*, while Six means *Yin*. On this day, people wear cornus (a plant), climb to hills or towers, enjoy chrysanthemums and wine, and eat Chongyang Gao (a kind of pastry) for longevity and auspiciousness. “重阳”, as a social phenomenon only found in Chinese culture, is totally absent in English culture. Due to the vacancy of correspondent equivalent in target language, it is difficult for target readers to grasp its real meaning; meanwhile, the cultural orientations can make a direct translation nonsensical. Therefore, although the first two versions (X and D) apply literal translation to explain that “重阳” is a day, target language readers without special Chinese cultural background still feel puzzled about what kind of festival it is on earth. K uses free translation to account for the definition of “重阳”, but this version doesn’t introduce it as a new cultural item and will not do good to the spread of Chinese culture. Comparatively speaking, G is better by adopting literal translation with annotation, which keeps the original’s essence, nay, redounds to target language readers’ understanding.

Ex.2 东篱把酒黄昏后

- X: At dusk I drink before *chrysanthemums in bloom*.  
D: A cup of wine, at twilight,  
In the *east garden*.



K: Now in the yellow twilight  
I drink by the *Eastern wall*,  
G: By the *east fence*,  
Holding a cup of wine after dusk fell

In fact, “东篱” is an allusion from Tao Yuanming’s poem *Drinking (The Fifth)*: “采菊东篱下,悠然见南山。” (In plucking chrysanthemums beneath the east hedge, I vacantly see the southern mountain afar.). Generally, allusions mean the quotations of ancient words in literature or stated by forefathers to express the Ci-poet’s own feelings and implications, which are loaded by historical and literary culture. Without relevant Chinese cultural background, there must be a cultural vacancy that equivalents of allusions cannot be found in the target culture; hereupon, it is hard to combine the associative meaning of allusions of the source language with that of the target language when translating. “东篱” generally refers to any place to appreciate chrysanthemums; moreover, “篱” means “a row of bushes or small trees planted close together, usually along the edge of a field, garden/yard or road” forming a fence or boundary, thus D and G respectively renders “东篱” into “east garden” and “east fence” is feasible to some degree, but both versions cannot give expression to the associative and symbolic meaning of this allusion. That K translates “东篱” into “Eastern wall” is more inapposite, since “wall” means “a log upright solid structure, made of stone, brick or concrete, that surrounds, divides or protects an area of land”, distinguishing from “fence” or “hedge”. As for X, despite adopting free translation by choosing “chrysanthemums in bloom” to deliver the basic plot of allusion, it will expand the length and lose the concise style of Ci-poetry. In sum, to translate this category of culture-loaded words involving allusions, the relative best method is to work for literal translation or transliteration added with footnotes to explicate allusions, with which English readers not only comprehend those stories behind the allusions, viz. the associative meaning of the culture-loaded words, but also experience the original’s intention and flavor.

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## CONCLUSION

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Ci-poetry, as a charming and significant form of Chinese ancient poetry, holds an important position in the spread of oriental literature and cross-cultural communication. Whereas, nicety of delivering the meanings of words that are culture-bounded becomes an obvious barrier during Ci-poetry translation. Hereupon, this thesis researches the proper rendering of culture-loaded words in Ci-poetry from the perspective of the theory of meaning, by means of choosing the very typical Ci-poem *Turn of Zui Hua Yin* written by Li Qingzhao as a case study and comparing four English versions of it, which are translated in different times and by the translators from

different cultures. And some conclusions are drawn as follows:

First, when translating the culture-loaded words in Ci-poetry into English, translators should take the theory of meaning into account, esp. focus more on associative meaning of those words, which are influenced by various cultural elements. To achieve good translation, it is necessary for translators to understand both conceptual and associative meaning of the culture-loaded words accurately, and have a good command of the related cultural background in both source and target languages.

Second, when evaluating translations of Ci-poetry, the nicety of delivering the meanings of the culture-loaded words can never be neglected. The principal criterion is to remain the characteristics the culture-loaded words in the original, and meanwhile, make the target readers comprehend the conceptual and associative meaning of those words correctly to have the resonance as in the source culture. During this process, it is not proper to affirm or negative some translation across-the-board, but to compare and analyze the different versions so as to find out a most appropriate way to render the culture-loaded words in Ci-poetry.

Third, as for the specific translation methods, there is no universal and fixed one. Specific translation methods should depend on the different situation. Overemphasizing on literal translation or liberal translation is one-sided and unscientific. Either of the extreme should be avoided in the course of translating culture-loaded words in Ci-poetry.

However, due to the writer’s limited knowledge and competence, this thesis certainly has some limitations. First, this study is just from the aspect of meaning of the culture-loaded words in Ci-poetry translation, but does not consider other aspects such as rhyme element, the aesthetic view, etc.. Second, this thesis chooses most typical Ci-poem *Turn of Zui Hua Yin* and its four significant translations as a case study, but still cannot cover all, which may lose some important points. Third, some more specific and appropriate translation methods could be further investigated in this study, e.g. transliteration, paraphrase, etc.. So there are still many problems that haven’t been solved in this thesis and further researches should be needed.

In the end, despite those limitations of this thesis the author does hope that this study can serve as a reference and have some academic help for further researches on the translation of culture-loaded words in Ci-poetry.

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