

## *Original Paper*

# A Translation Study of Cultural Vacancy in the book *To Live* under the Guidance of Relevance Translation Theory

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### **Abstract**

*The cultural vacancy refers to the cultural information carried in one language that has no counterpart in another language. Cultural vacancies are common in the book To Live, and the quality of its translation affects foreign readers' understanding and acceptance of the distinctive Chinese culture. In this paper, the author sorts out the version of To Live translated by Michael Berry on the Internet, and studies the English translation methods of its cultural vacancies guided by Relevance Translation Theory, including literal translation, free translation, and transliteration with annotations, in order to improve the translation quality of To Live, to accurately convey the meaning of the original text of To Live to foreign readers, to promote the exchange and dissemination of To Live written by Yu Hua and other excellent Chinese novels in the world, and improve China's cultural soft power.*

### **Keywords**

*Relevance Translation Theory, To Live, Cultural vacancy*

## **1. Introduction**

As we all know, China's international status is constantly improving, its cultural soft power is constantly strengthening, and more and more excellent Chinese novels are spreading abroad. As one of the excellent Chinese novels, the English translation of *To Live* plays a crucial role in the dissemination of culture. The cultural vacancy is very common in the translation of Chinese novels, and the research of its translation methods has a great influence on the development of *To Live*. If cultural vacancies are not properly handled, the translation will be affected. Foreign readers will find it difficult to understand the true meaning and background knowledge of *To Live*, and the effect of cultural output will be greatly reduced. Therefore, starting from Michael Berry's translation version of *To Live*, the author will study new methods for the translation of cultural vacancies, to optimize the translation effect of *To Live*, promote the external dissemination of *To Live*, and make excellent Chinese novels better to the world.

In addition, scholars at home and abroad have explored the translation of cultural vacancies in multiple dimensions and perspectives. However, few scholars have studied the cultural vacancy in *To Live* guided by Relevance Translation Theory. Relevance Translation Theory is a major breakthrough in contemporary western translation theory, which has important guiding significance for the study of the translation of *To Live* and its cultural vacancy. Therefore, this paper will explore the feasibility of Relevance Translation Theory in the field of translation of cultural vacancies, and provide new approaches and methods for the English translation of cultural vacancies so as to promote the development of Relevance Translation Theory in the field of cultural vacancy.

## 2. Literature Review

The cultural vacancy is a very common phenomenon in the translation of *To Live* and other excellent Chinese novels. Its translation methods are related to the translation results of *To Live* and the international dissemination of culture with Chinese characteristics. Therefore, how to properly translate the cultural vacancies in *To Live* has become the research objective of numerous scholars, and the results of research by national and international scholars have made great contributions to promoting the translation process of the cultural vacancies in *To Live*.

### 2.1 Former Studies on the Translation of Cultural Vacancy in the book *To Live at Home*

With the development of exchanges and cooperation between China and other nations around the world, more and more translation scholars have engaged in the translation of excellent Chinese novels such as *To Live*, making great contributions to excellent Chinese novels. In terms of cultural vacancy theory, many domestic scholars have defined cultural vacancy from different perspectives. Wang (2008) believes that the cultural vacancy is a cultural phenomenon. People from other cultures may be unable to understand or accept a particular culture's uniqueness, which can lead to misunderstandings, thus leading to cultural vacancies in other cultures. Pan and Li (2000) define the cultural vacancy as a unique linguistic and cultural phenomenon, which is considered to be a characteristic unique to a people that does not exist in other languages. In addition, Wang (1997) proposed the concept of "Cultural Default". According to him, cultural default refers to the common background knowledge or pragmatic presuppositions related to the cultural context that can be omitted in communication and are self-evident to both sides of the communication. The proposed concept of cultural default deepened scholars' cognition of cultural vacancy and made a profound impact on the research and development of cultural vacancy. The author thinks that the cultural vacancy refers to the cultural information carried in one language that has no counterpart in another language.

Many scholars have also studied the translation of cultural vacancies from different perspectives. From the perspective of intercultural communication, Li (2010) focused on the causes of lexical vacancies and the significance of lexical vacancies research on intercultural communication. She showed that through studying the phenomenon of lexical vacancies, mastering the deep causes of lexical vacancies, and understanding its connotation, misunderstandings and barriers in intercultural communication can

be avoided and obstacles can be reduced, so that intercultural communication can be carried out smoothly. Wang (2004) studies the handling of cultural differences in translation from the perspective of domestication and foreignization. She believed that foreignization is used to translate cultural vacancies and convey cultural information from the original language to the target language. They have made indelible contributions to domestic research achievements in this field by studying cultural vacancy from multiple perspectives.

By checking the database of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the author found that there are a large amount of documents about the English versions of *To Live*, involving various perspectives. Scholars have discussed the English versions of *To Live* from the perspectives of Eco-translatology, skopos theory and cultural translation theory and so on. Up to now, the translation of *To Live* in China has had many achievements, but it also has some limitations. For example, few people have studied the translation of the cultural vacancies in *To Live* guided by Relevance Translation Theory. Relevance Theory is the most influential cognitive pragmatics theory in recent years. As a theory of verbal communication and cognition, Relevance Theory provides the theoretical basis and explanatory power in dealing with cultural vacancies and their translation. Based on Relevance Translation Theory, cultural vacancies can be effectively eliminated by adopting appropriate translation strategies to maximize the fit between the target text and the original text, achieve the optimal relevance, and attain the optimal communicative effect (Li, 2013). Therefore, it is viable to use Relevance Translation Theory to direct the study of cultural vacancies in the English translation of *To Live*.

## 2.2 Former Studies on the Translation of Cultural Vacancy in the book *To Live at Abroad*

Same as previous domestic studies, many scholars abroad have studied cultural vacancies, the translation of *To Live* and Relevance Translation Theory. As far as the theory of cultural vacancy is concerned, in 1954, the American linguist Hockett first introduced the conception of “Vacancy” when comparing the grammatical patterns of two languages. He named it the “Accidental Gap” to describe this linguistic phenomenon (Hockett, 1958). The translation theorist Bakhtarov used the term “without equivalent lexemes” when comparing the words of different languages. Exploring the language of Australia’s original inhabitants, the American cultural anthropologist Hall noticed that the language of this country lacked the basic vocabulary for colors, which was almost always found in other languages. He applied the words “vacancy” and “gap” in his thesis. To the late 1980s, the Russian scholar Sorokin proposed the theory of vacancy after analyzing the discourse and national characteristics, from which the theory came into being (Zhou, 2020).

Due to the differences between Chinese and Western cultures and historical backgrounds, the English translation of *To Live* was an arduous task. Based on his love for the original work, Michael Berry translated *To Live* in 1996. In the process of translation, he paid great attention to the transmission of thinking habits, historical customs, religious culture and other cultural images in the cultural context of the original text. On the macro level, he successfully reproduced the language form in the original text

and maintained consistency with the structure and characterization of the original text. On the micro level, its translation perfectly embodied the Chinese philosophy of life contained in the original text.

### 2.3 Current Problems in Former Studies

In conclusion, domestic and foreign scholars have explored cultural vacancies in multiple dimensions and perspectives, and have also shown that Relevance Translation Theory can direct the translation of cultural vacancies. However, the research has also identified some shortcomings. For example, research papers that use Relevance Translation Theory to instruct the translation of cultural vacancies in *To Live* are very few, and few practical suggestions are given by scholars around the world on how to direct the translation of cultural vacancies in *To Live* using Relevance Translation Theory. Therefore, further research on the English translation of *To Live* and how to direct the translation of cultural vacancies in *To Live* using Relevance Translation Theory are needed by scholars at home and abroad.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter is the theoretical framework of the article, introducing the formation and notions of Relevance Translation Theory, and the function of Relevance Translation Theory on the translation of cultural vacancy in the book *To Live*. A full understanding of the theory facilitates a better study of the translation of cultural vacancy in the book *To Live*.

### 3.1 The Formation of Relevance Translation Theory

Relevance Theory is a cognitive pragmatics theory that emerged in the 1980s. In 1986, the French linguist Sperber and the British linguist Wilson published the book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, in which they put forward Relevance Theory, an essential theory of cognitive pragmatics. After the emergence of Relevance Theory, as one of the students of Sperber and Wilson, Gutt, a German scholar, published the book *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* in 1991, which was the first application of Relevance Theory to translation. According to Gutt (2014), translation is a unique type of verbal communication between two languages, and an inference process closely related to the mechanism of the brain. Shen Jiaxuan was the one who originally presented Relevance Theory to China, Shen introduced the contents of chapter one “Communication” and chapter three “Relevance” in Sperber and Wilson’s book, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* in 1988. In addition, Lin (1994) was the first scholar to introduce Relevance Translation Theory into China, he introduced some of the main points of Relevance Translation Theory in *Introduction to Relevance Translation Theory* in 1994.

### 3.2 The Concepts of Relevance Translation Theory

Relevance Translation Theory does not provide a specific theoretical system but consists of several viewpoints. The major viewpoints include ostensive-inferential communication, optimal relevance and cognitive environment.

#### 3.2.1 Ostensive-Inferential Communication

Relevance Translation Theory analyzes discourse from the viewpoint of human cognition, and its major

communicative mode is ostensive-inferential communication. For the speaker, communication is an ostensive process, that is, the speaker clearly conveys his message intention to the listener through verbal or non-verbal explicit stimulus. For the listener, communication is a process of inference, that is, according to the speaker's explicit behavior, combining the cognitive context and relevant information, so as to obtain the communicative intention and achieve the communicative purpose (Niu, 2014).

### 3.2.2 Optimal Relevance

Sperber and Wilson (1995) reckon that linguistic communication is a process whereby the speaker "manifest" his or her intentions in words to the listener according to his or her ability and preference, and the listener selects the most relevant known information on the basis of the resulting words, obtaining the best contextual effect, thus achieving successful communication. Relevant Theory suggests that successful communication depends on the achievement of some optimal association, that is, the listener wants to obtain sufficient contextual effects without too much effort and that it is worth it for him to make some kind of inference about the discourse. Optimal relevance is not maximum relevance, but rather optimal relevance. Maximum relevance refers to maximum contextual effect with minimum processing effort, while optimal relevance refers to sufficient contextual effect to understand the discourse with minimum processing effort for the listener.

Optimal relevance is the principle and standard of translation studies, and it is also the goal of the translator, who should strive to achieve this goal so that the intentions of the author of the original text match the hopes of the readers of the translated text (Lin, 1994).

### 3.2.3 Cognitive Environment

One of the key contributions of Sperber and Wilson is the concept of 'cognitive environment'. The cognitive environment is a different view of dynamic contexts, which are constructed during the process of communication and consist of a set of assumptions. According to Sperber and Wilson, the environment in which people communicate is the cognitive context. Cognitive context is the product of the interaction between the environment and cognitive ability. It contains all the facts that a person can perceive or infer and provides assistance in understanding speech correctly. In communication, cognitive context is divided into pre-existing cognition and the cognitive environment that arises in communication. The pre-existing cognitive environment refers to the knowledge stored in the brain prior to verbal communication, such as linguistic and cultural knowledge, the rules of communication, history, social environment, scientific assumptions, values and perceptions of the speaker's state of consciousness. The cognitive environment that arises during communication mainly refers to the need for the listener to constantly add to or update his or her original assumptions in the light of new information, providing additional conditions for the success of the communication.

### 3.3 *The Function of Relevance Translation Theory on the Translation of Cultural Vacancy in the book To Live*

As is well-known, language translation is not only the conversion of meaning, but also the communication between two varying cultures, with the purpose of correctly conveying the true

meaning expressed in the original text and striving for the integration of different cultures. As countries have formed unique cultures in their long history of development, and there are cultural differences between different nationalities and countries, in the actual translation process, translators will inevitably encounter some characteristic cultural concepts and cultural connotations, and these characteristic cultures will create cultural vacancies in the translation process.

In the book *To Live*, Yu Hua tells the history of China in the 20th century in the voice of the protagonist Xu Fugui. The book contains many words and colloquialisms with Chinese characteristics, so there are bound to be many cultural vacancies in the process of its English translation. As a winner of the Grezana Cavour Prize, *To Live* has been translated into many languages and is loved by people from many countries around the world. Therefore, the English translation of cultural vacancies in the book *To Live* is particularly important for its dissemination on the world cultural stage, and Relevance Translation Theory can provide a certain theoretical basis and explanatory power in dealing with cultural vacancies and their translations.

Translation under the framework of Relevance Translation theory is a dynamic interpretation process of ostensive-inferential, and the responsibility of preventing and avoiding misunderstanding by readers of the translated language lies entirely on the translator's side, a process that is not entirely reciprocal. The translator must therefore reproduce the original author's intentions in a clear manner for the reader of the translated language in order to make it possible for the reader to interpret the author's pragmatic presuppositions. For another, the successful communication depends on the realization of optimal relevance of the discourse to the context, and the translator should create a context with the optimal relevance for the reader of the translated language, in order to obtain the same contextual effect as the reader of the original language. This provides two important insights into the reconstruction of translation of cultural vacancies. Firstly, in the process of comprehension, the translator must identify cultural vacancies in the original language in order to deduce the intended message of the original. Secondly, in the process of expression, the translator needs to reproduce this message in an explicit way for the target language reader. In the process of reconstruction, the translator needs to make reasonable guesses about the cognitive environment of the target readers, translate the cultural vacancies in the original text reasonably through reasonable translation methods, and build a cultural context that fits the culture of the target language readers, to make the translation contextually appropriate. Therefore, the use of Relevance Translation Theory is most appropriate to guide the English translation of cultural vacancies in the book *To Live*.

#### **4. Case Study**

Cultural vacancy is a frequent phenomenon in the English translation of *To Live*, and its translation methods and quality affect the foreign dissemination of *To Live*. This chapter will discuss its translation methods guided by Relevance Translation Theory and combine it with case studies, look forward to bringing some new insights and perspectives to the translation of cultural vacancies in *To Live* and

promoting the communication and dissemination of *To Live* and other excellent Chinese novels to the foreign countries.

#### 4.1 Literal Translation

Literal translation means that the linguistic form of the original work should be maintained as far as possible in the translation process, and the language should be smooth and easy to understand (Tong, 2007). When the original language and the target language are close in terms of expression and semantics, it is unnecessary to explain the cultural vacancy in the original text. The literal translation is used to translate the original text while reserving the original form, seeking both spiritual resemblance and formal resemblance, so that the translator can realize the optimal relevance between form and content. On the premise of ensuring equivalence, literal translation is the best translation method, and it is the only effective translation method. It not only retains the vividness of the original content, makes the target readers feel the foreign culture, and also brings a novel and unique way of thinking to the target readers (Li, 2013). For example:

##### Case 1

私塾先生说我是朽木不可雕也 (Yu, 2010)。

My teacher used to say I was **a rotten piece of wood that could not be carved** (Yu, 2003).

##### Case 2

我那副模样让她信了，我娘一屁股坐在了地上。抹着眼泪说：“上梁不正下梁歪啊 (Yu, 2010)。”

The book on my face convinced her. My mother sat down on the floor and, wiping her tears, said, “**if the upper beam is not straight, the lower ones will go aslant** (Yu, 2003).”

The phrase “朽木不可雕也” is a Chinese colloquialism from *The Analects of Confucius*, which originally means rotten wood that cannot be carved, and is used to describe a person who is incorrigible, or whose failure is difficult to change. The original text refers to the teacher’s great disappointment with Xu Fugui due to his various bad behaviors. The original text refers to the teacher’s great disappointment with Xu Fugui due to his various bad behaviors. The phrase “上梁不正下梁歪” refers to the fact that when the person at the top behaves improperly, the people below him also follow suit and do bad things. This passage tells the story of Xu Fugui, who has lost his entire family fortune through gambling. His mother is angry and distressed, but out of love for Xu Fugui, she has no choice but to blame his father, so she says “上梁不正下梁歪”. These two proverbs have no equivalent in English, in order to reproduce the form and culture of the original, the translator has chosen literal translation, retaining the words “朽木”, “上梁” and “下梁” in the translation to reproduce the Chinese culture and give the target language readers a more intuitive comprehension of this cultural concept of Chinese. Literal translation creates a context with the optimal relevance for the target readers guided by Relevance Translation Theory, so as to obtain the contextual effect of convergence with the original readers, so that the cultural identity of the original text can be felt to the greatest extent by the target readers.

#### 4.2 Free Translation

Free translation is a translation that respects the meaning of the original text without excessive attention to detail, so that the translation is smooth and natural. Free translation does not have to pay more attention to the original form, including its structure and rhetoric. However, free translation is not a deletion or addition to the original text. When translating, the original content must be carefully considered, the emphasis of the original text must be grasped, and the style and appearance of the original text must be presented to the readers (Gao & Li, 2008). Relevance Translation Theory requires translators to fully consider the factor of cognitive context of the source language in the translating process, infer the information intent and communicative intent of the author of the source language, and construct a cognitive context that is easy to understand for the target readers. Free translation can not only reflect the national language features of the source language, but also make the translated version easily understandable and acceptable to the readers of target language. For example:

##### Case 3

做牛耕田，做狗看家，做和尚**化缘**，做鸡**报晓**，做女人织布，哪头牛不耕田？这可是自古就有的道理，走呀，走呀 (Yu, 2010)。

Oxen plough the fields, dogs watch over the house, monks **beg for alms**, chickens **call at the break of day** and women do the weaving. Have you ever heard of an ox that didn't plough the land? This is a truth that has been with us since ancient times. Come on, let's go (Yu, 2003).

##### Case 4

年过花甲的私塾先生对我爹说：“你家少爷长大了准能当个**二流子** (Yu, 2010)。”

The next time he saw my father, my teacher, who was really getting on in years, told him, “I guarantee you that when that son of yours grows up, he'll be **nothing but trouble** (Yu, 2003).”

Relevance Translation Theory requires that the translator needs to reproduce the information intention of the source language author for the target language reader in a clear way, that is, through reasonable translation methods, to reasonably translate the cultural vacancies in the original text, and construct a cultural context that conforms to the culture of target language, so that the translation has a corresponding contextual effect. Numerous cultural vacancies in the book *To Live* have Chinese characteristics. If literal translation is applied, it will be not easy for foreign readers to understand. Therefore, in order to improve the translation quality of *To Live* and make it easier for target readers to understand and accept, free translation can be regarded as a better translation method.

In Case 3, the word “化缘” refers to the act of a monk begging for alms, and the word “报晓” refers to the rooster crowing in the morning. These two words have deep Chinese characteristics, and when translating them, free translation is the best way to make the target language readers understand the meaning of the original text and at the same time let them understand the Chinese language and culture. In Case 4, the word “二流子” is a Chinese folk buzzword that refers to a person who is lazy and unprofessional, but there is no equivalent word for it in English. Therefore, in order to let the readers of the target language better understand the image of the main character Xu Fugui as a playboy, the



translator used the translation method of idiomatic that belonging to free translation, translating “二流子” as “nothing but trouble”. In the film *Nothing but Trouble*, which was released in the United States in 1994, the main character’s uneducated and mischievous image is a perfect match for Xu Fugui in the book *To Live*. By the translation method of idiomatic, the translator presented the character to the target language readers precisely, so that the target language readers have the same reflection of this image of Xu Fugui as the original readers, successfully achieving the communication between the original author and the target language readers (Zhang B. H. & Zhang, J. L., 2022). In summary, free translation will make the target readers get the content of the original text easier, so as to achieve the purpose of filling cultural vacancies.

#### 4.3 Transliteration with Annotation

The main purpose of the English translation is to convey the true meaning of the original content, so as to fuse different cultures (Qian, 2015). When transliteration alone cannot accurately and completely convey the content of the original language, the translation of the cultural vacancy is not guaranteed, at this point, transliteration with annotation is a better option. The addition of annotations supplies background knowledge for the target language reader and plays the role of cultural compensation. Relevance Translation Theory holds that communication is a process of inference for the target language readers. The reader of the target language can obtain the communicative purpose of the original language author and achieve the communicative purpose by reasoning with the cognitive context and relevant information based on the annotation made by the translator.

##### Case 5

我们徐家有一百多亩地 (Yu, 2010)。

Our family had over one hundred mu of land (Yu, 2003).

Annotation: Chinese unit of area is equivalent to 1 /7 acre or 0.0667 hectares.

##### Case 6

队长陪着城里请来的风水先生在村里转悠开了 (Yu, 2010)。

The team leader accompanied the town fengshui expert on a leisurely stroll around the village (Yu, 2003).

Annotation: Fengshui, also known as geomancy...that will have the greatest positive influence on the fortune of the individual, family or company that uses it.

The word “亩” in Case 5 is an expression for the Chinese unit of land area, which does not have an exact English equivalent in English. The translator did not convert “亩” into an expression for the unit of area familiar to foreign readers, instead, he used transliteration to translate it into Chinese pinyin “mu”. Considering that readers of the target language cannot understand the meaning of “mu”, the translator added an annotation to it, thus preserving the form of the original text and achieving a communicative effect at the same time. The word “风水” in Case 6 is a unique Chinese word, and for Chinese people, they know the meaning of “风水” without any explanation. However, for foreign readers, this is a concept not found in their culture, and it is difficult for them to understand it without

explanation. Therefore, the translator adopted the translation method of transliteration with annotation, which not only enables foreign readers to understand that there is the term “风水” in China, but also provides an in-depth understanding of the meaning of “风水”. Guided by Relevance Translation Theory, the translation method of transliteration with annotation correctly conveys the true meaning of the original text, compensates for the cultural vacancies in *To Live*, and achieves the integration of different cultures.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper explored translation methods suitable for cultural vacancies in *To Live* guided by Relevance Translation Theory. This paper elaborated on three concepts of Relevance Translation Theory, including ostensive-inferential communication, optimal relevance and cognitive environment. Guided by these three concepts, the translation of cultural vacancies in *To Live* was analyzed from the perspectives of literal translation, free translation, transliteration and transliteration with annotations. Literal translation retains the form of the original text while translating its content, looking for both formal resemblance and spiritual resemblance, and achieving the optimal relevance between form and content. Free translation makes the translation easy to understand and accessible to the target language readers. The translation method of transliteration with annotations helps to supply background knowledge for the target reader and plays the role of cultural compensation. In addition, the author combined Relevance Translation Theory with the translation of cultural vacancies and found that Relevance Translation Theory is very instructive for the English translation of cultural vacancies, which deserves further study by domestic and foreign scholars.

However, because the author’s knowledge is not broad enough, this paper is not very comprehensive and in-depth in its study of the English translation of cultural vacancies in *To Live*, there is still much room for improvement in the research on translation methods of cultural vacancies.

Through the study of the translation of cultural vacancies in the book *To Live*, the author has realized the profound cultural heritage of excellent Chinese novels and hopes that more scholars will take part in the study of the translation of *To Live* to promote the spread of the book *To Live* in countries around the world.

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