

# A Diachronic Study on Translation Strategies of Culture-specific Items With the Translation of Measurement Unit in Howard Goldblatt's Works as An Example

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**Abstract:** The translation of culture-specific items (CSI) has been a challenge for translators as well as cited examples for untranslatability. With the analysis of the strategies employed on the Chinese-English translation of measurement unit by Howard Goldblatt in his translation works of different times, this paper discusses the transition from “untranslatable” to “translatable” of certain CSIs. Translation strategies for CSI are also proposed with the consideration of how Chinese culture being introduced into the outside world. The study shows that although Goldblatt clearly advocates “reader-centered” translation, that is, the translator should translate for the target language reader, and emphasizes that the translator can only translate and be responsible for the target language reader, we can still see his efforts to introduce Chinese culture to American readers through his translation.

**Keywords:** Howard Goldblatt; culture-specific item; measurement unit; diachronic study

**Publication date:** November 2018

**Publication online:** 30<sup>th</sup> November 2018

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## 0 Introduction

With the improvement of China's political and economic strength and the development of comprehensive national strength as well as the continuous deepening of cultural exchanges between China and the West, more and more expressions related to Chinese culture have entered the English-speaking countries through translation. From tofu, chow mien, and Dim Sum, which have become the daily vocabulary of English, to feng shui, Guanxi,

kung fu, yin yang, which involves Chinese culture, then to the nearest Tuhao, Dama, increasing number of such expressions are being introduced and integrated into English. When these vocabulary with Chinese cultural characteristics enter English, some are translated by repetition (i.e., Chinese Pinyin), and some of them are translated by converting spelling (i.e., converting letter system or transliteration), and after years of accumulation, they finally become part of the English language. The cultural information carried by them also transferred into the English culture.

The above examples are all “culture-specific items (CSI).” In the process of translating Chinese literary works into English, the CSIs in the works are undoubtedly crucial to the spread of the source language culture. The Chinese CSIs vividly reflect the unique characteristics of Chinese culture and are important carriers for all countries in the world to understand Chinese culture. Due to the semantic and cultural gaps in the target language, the CSIs cause great difficulties for translators. Translators must consider not only two languages but also two cultures. Due to different geographical environments, customs, beliefs, etc., some concepts in the source language culture do not exist in the target language. Even if an approximate expression is found, it is difficult to fully convey the cultural information carried by the original text. As a result, the uniqueness and significance of the Chinese CSI cause the translation from Chinese to English various problems and different levels of difficulty.

This article analyzes the translation strategies employed in the 10 Chinese-English translations from 1978 to 2013 by Howard Goldblatt. Through the diachronic study

of the translation strategies of the same type of “CSI (i.e., unit of measurement)” in different historical periods, it shows that there is a shift from “untranslatable” to “translatable” in the translation of CSI. In addition, the translation strategies of “CSI” in the context of “Chinese culture going out” are also explored.

## 1 Literature Review

### 1.1 Definition

The concept of CSI was first proposed by the Spanish translator Aixelá. He defined CSIs as: Those textually actualized items whose function and connotations in a source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the nonexistence of the referred item or of its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text<sup>[1]</sup>. Aixelá explained that the purpose of his definition is to show that what is a CSI depends not only on the item itself but also on the function of the item in the text as understood by the target language culture. That is to say, if any general reader in the culture of the target language or any person in power feels the item ideologically or culturally incomprehensible or unacceptable, then it is a CSI<sup>[2]</sup>.

Scholars of Chinese mainland often use “culture-loaded words.” For example, Wenzhong<sup>[3]</sup>: Culture-loaded words refer to vocabulary within a specific cultural scope, which is a direct or indirect reflection of national culture in the lexical vocabulary. Qiyl<sup>[4]</sup> believes that “culture-loaded words” are words, phrases, and idioms that mark the unique things in a certain culture, reflecting the unique way of activity of specific ethnic groups accumulated in the long historical process, which is different from that of other ethnic groups. Zaixi<sup>[5]</sup> referred to it as a “lexical gap” caused by different life experiences, different world views,

as well as language and cultural differences. For the convenience of discussion, this article uses the name of “CSI.”

### 1.2 Categories

According to Nida’s classification of culture, New Mark<sup>[6]</sup> divided the CSI into five categories. Vlahov and Florin refer to CSI as “realia,” which can be divided into three main categories<sup>[7]</sup>. From the perspective of Aixelá<sup>[1]</sup>, CSI can be divided into proper nouns and common expressions [Table 1].

### 1.3 Translation strategies for CSI

Many scholars have put forward different translation strategies for CSI. New mark<sup>[6]</sup> proposed 12 strategies for the translation of CSI. According to the degree of cultural manipulation, Aixelá<sup>[1]</sup> divided the strategies into two categories: Reservation and substitution, based on which 11 specific translation strategies were proposed [Table 2].

## 2 Diachronic study on translation strategies of the measurement unit

In this study, 10 of Howard Goldblatt’s Chinese-English translation works from 1978 to 2013 are selected, and the translation strategies of “measurement units” are compared from a diachronic perspective. Due to space limitations, only a few example sentences are listed [Table 3].

### 2.1 Quality unit: Jin and Liang (pound and ounce)

Different words are used in different works as listed in Table 4.

### 2.2 Unit of length: chi, cun, zhang, and li

For the translation of “cun,” it was translated with “inch” in all the selected translation works. For the translation of “chi,” it was translated with “foot” in most cases. As

Table 1: Main categories of CSI

New mark	Vlahov and florin	Aixelá
Ecology	Geographic realia	Proper nouns
Material culture	Ethnographic realia	Common expressions
Social culture		
Organizations, customs, activities, procedures, concepts		
Gestures and habits	Political and social realia	

CSI: Culture-specific items

**Table 2.: Translation strategies for CSI**

New mark	Aixelá
Transference	Repetition
Cultural equivalent	Orthographic adaptation
Neutralization	linguistic (non-cultural) translation
Literal translation	Extratextual gloss
Label	Intratextual gloss
Naturalization	Synonymy
Componential analysis	Limited universalization
Deletion	Absolute universalization
Couplet	Naturalization
Accepted standard translation	Deletion
Paraphrase, gloss, notes, etc.	Autonomous creation
Classifier	

CSI: Culture-specific items

for “zhang,” it was translated with “meter” or “foot” after conversion, or directly translated with “yard.” For “li,” in the 1978 translation of *The Execution of Mayor Yin and Other Stories from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*, it was translated into “li” with a footnote for the first one. While in the 1993 translation of *Red Sorghum*, it was translated into non-italicized “li” with a note in the text. There’s an exception in the 2000 translation of *The Republic of Wine* as shown below:

Example: 驴街二里长，杀驴铺子列两旁。

Translation: Donkey Avenue is a mile long, with butcher shops on both sides.

For all the other cases, “li” was used as a common English word.

### 2.3 Unit of land area: mu

In the 1993 translation of *Red Sorghum*, “mu” was translated as “mou” with a note in the text.

Example: 他与母亲耕种三亩薄地度日。

Translation: So he and his mother had eked out a living by tending three mou---less than half an acre--- of miserable land.

In the 2001 translation of *Shifu, You’ll Do Anything for a Laugh*, “mu” was translated with “acre,” which results in a large gap between the land area in the translation and that of the original. In example one, the original text is “five mu,” which is less than “an acre,” while the translation is “a few acres”. In example two, the original text is “three mu,” which is close to “half an acre,” while the translation is “near an acre.”

Example one: 玉米田约有五亩左右，玉米长得不好，一穗穗棒子短而细小，看来既缺肥又缺水。

Translation: The field was no larger than a few acres, and the thin, stumpy ears of corn did not look healthy, apparently deprived of both fertilizer and water.

Example two: 这片黑松林有三亩见方，林下数百个土馒头里包孕着东北乡人的祖先。

Translation: The black pines, covering nearly an acre, kept watch over hundreds of mounds under which Northeastern Gaomi ancestors lay.

In the 2013 translation of *Sandalwood Death*, “mu” was also translated with “acre,” but with the same large gap between the land area in the translation and that of the original. In the original text, “two mu” is less than “half an acre,” while the translation is “two acres” as shown in the example below.

Example: 半个月后，小奎的爹找了人作保，卖了二亩地，才把小奎赎出来。

Translation: Two weeks later, his father sold two acres of land to pay someone to stand as guarantor to get his son back.

### 2.4 Case analysis

For the translation of quality unit, the strategy of domestication is adopted in most cases, with the conversion between units to ensure that the weight in the original text is basically the same as that of the translation. Until the 2013 translation of *Sandalwood Death*, Howard Goldblatt made a bold attempt - “jin” was borrowed directly from Chinese Pinyin. What’s more, in the third part of the novel, “liang” was translated with Chinese Pinyin. For the length unit, except for “li,” which has entered the English language in 1588, the strategy of domestication was adopted in all the other cases, with the conversion between units to ensure the same length as the original text. In the unit of land area, Goldblatt used the foreignization translation strategy in the 1993 translation of *Red Sorghum*, and tried to use the transliteration “mou” with an annotation in the text. However, in the subsequent translations, the domestication strategy was re-used; “mu” was translated into “acre” without accurate conversion between the units, resulting in an excessive error with the original text.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that in terms of the translation of the unit of measure, the translator generally adopts a domestication strategy. Although this is beneficial to the reader’s acceptance of information, the problem is that there may be errors in the conversion between the two units of measurement, resulting in

**Table 3: Translation works cited**

Name of the novel	Author	Publication time of the translation
The execution of mayor yin and other stories from the great proletarian cultural revolution	Chen Ruoxi	1978
The butcher's wife	Li Ang	1986
Market street	Xiao Hong	1986
Black snow	Liu Heng	1993
Red sorghum	Mo Yan	1993
The republic of wine	Mo Yan	2000
Shifu, you'll do anything for a laugh	Mo Yan	2001
My life as emperor	Su Tong	2005
The moon opera	Bi Feiyu	2007
Sandalwood death	Mo Yan	2013

**Table 4: The translation of “jin” and “liang” in different works**

Examples	Jin	Liang
The execution of mayor yin and other stories from the great proletarian cultural revolution (1978)	Catty (footnote: A catty equals 1 1/3 pounds)	Ounce
The butcher's wife (1986)	Catty and pound	Ounce
Black snow (1993)	Pound	Ounce
Red sorghum (1993)	Pound	
The republic of wine (2000)	Catty, pound, and kilogram	Ounce
My life as emperor (2005)		Tael
The moon opera (2013)	Jin and pound	Ounce, tael, and liang

misinterpretation, and affecting the reader's understanding of the original. At the same time, the emergence of “mou” also shows the translator's efforts to adopt the foreignization strategy and introduce the source language culture into the target language. However, such introduction requires a long and repeated process. Just like “li,” which has gone through a long process from its first entering the English language in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to being part of English now, reflects the transition from “untranslatable” to “no-need to be translated.”

### 3 Conclusion

From the perspective of translation strategy, translation always occurs in a certain historical context, and will be influenced by the dominant culture. Therefore, “untranslatable” is relative and always in a state of changing. As many of the “CSI” discussed in this article, they have gone through the process of “untranslatable” to “no need to be translated.” In this process, although some inexplicable CSIs in the source language culture have brought difficulties to translation,

they also promoted the contact and collision between the target language culture and the foreign culture. As Yifeng<sup>[8]</sup> puts it, “as long as the corresponding cultural and historical conditions are available, the solution to the problem of translation is inexhaustible. With the increase in cross-cultural exchanges, more effective methods have been created.”

From the 1978 translation of *The Execution of Mayor Yin and Other Stories from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* to the 2013 translation of *Sandalwood Death*, it has been more than 30 years. During this period, China has become a world economic power from a country with closed culture and economic backwardness, and plays an increasingly important role in the international arena. With Mo Yan winning the Nobel Prize in Literature, Chinese literary works are increasingly attracting the attention of Western readers. At the same time, Howard Goldblatt has also evolved from a start-up translator to a “chief translator” of modern and contemporary Chinese literature. His translation is getting better and better, and translation methods are constantly being adjusted. Especially after Mo Yan's award, there's a tendency of foreignization in his translation, and he is more and

more inclined to present Mo Yan's novels to English readers with the original flavor. In the translator's notes on the translation of *Sandalwood Death*, Howard Goldblatt clearly pointed out that some Chinese words have been successfully settled in the English world, and he "left a handful of terms untranslated." Therefore, although Goldblatt clearly advocates "reader-centered" translation, that is, the translator should translate for the target language reader, and emphasizes that the translator can only translate and be responsible for the target language reader; we can still see his efforts to introduce Chinese culture to American readers through his translation<sup>[9]</sup>.

In fact, if CSI appear frequently in translations, even a foreignization strategy is unlikely to affect the consistency of the translation, such as the repeated "dieh" in the English translation of *Sandalwood Death*. Some transliteration of CSI can be understood by the reader through context, which not only enriches the target language but also preserves the culture of the source language, such as the weight unit "jin" that appears repeatedly in *Sandalwood Death*.

From the perspective of cultural exchange, the appropriate foreignization of Chinese CSI in translation has its significance. In the context of globalization, the cultures between nations interact with each other. The continuous expansion and deepening of China's exchanges with countries around the world have created conditions for foreignization of Chinese CSI in translation. Actually, the degree of acceptance of foreignization translation is positively correlated with the breadth and depth of cultural interaction. With the increasing influence of globalization and

Chinese language, the foreignization translation of Chinese CSI can be helpful to faithfully reflect Chinese culture on an equal basis and promote China's opening up and exchanges. At the same time, it is also necessary to realize that effective cross-cultural communication cannot be achieved overnight. Therefore, when translating "CSI," we should gradually increase the cultural information so that CSI can complete the transition from "untranslatable" to "not necessary to be translated."

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