

Cultural Filtering in Literary Translation: A Case Study of Sidney Shapiro's English Version of *The Family*

Jinfeng Zhang, Weiwei Wang

Guangdong University of Finance & Economics, Guangzhou 510320, Guangdong, China

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Abstract: Cultural filtering is deeply embedded in cross-cultural literary exchange and exerts a lasting influence on both the transmission and interpretation of literary works. This article examines the English translation of Ba Jin's *The Family* by Sidney Shapiro, focusing on the manifestations and underlying causes of cultural filtering in the translated text. The translator adopts a range of strategies—including the addition of cultural annotations, selective omission, and abridged translation of certain content—to implement various forms of cultural filtering. These choices are shaped by multiple filtering processes, such as the translator's cultural identity and his understanding of traditional Chinese culture. While cultural filtering in cross-cultural translation is inevitable and may result in partial loss of meaning, it can also breathe new life into the source text and facilitate mutual understanding and dialogue between different cultural systems.

Keywords: Cultural filtering; Sidney Shapiro; *The Family*

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1. Cultural filtering and its processes

The subjectivity and creativity of target audiences inject vitality into the transmission of literary works. In recent years, scholars in China's comparative literature field have paid increasing attention to the study of cultural filtering. Professor Cao Qingshun^[1] defines cultural filtering as the selection, transformation, adaptation, and reinvention—either intentional or unconscious—of cultural elements during cross-cultural literary communication. These processes arise from differences in the recipient's cultural traditions, historical background, and aesthetic preferences, leading to shifts in the original content and form. Examining cultural filtering helps uncover the process behind literary variation and enhances the agency of marginalized cultures in intercultural exchange, particularly in the context of globalization. While cultural filtering is often inevitable—and may even result in partial loss of original meaning, serving not only to enhance mutual understanding, but also to enable different cultures to verify each other's values and to complement each other's strengths^[2]. In literary communication, translators often filter out elements perceived as incompatible with the target

culture while incorporating aspects that resonate locally, thereby enabling the integration of foreign cultural material into the domestic context. These cultural filtering processes are shaped by traditional values, historical conditions, individual experience, and ideological stance^[3], all of which deeply influence the outcome of literary exchange.

2. Cultural filtering in translation

Studies of cross-cultural literary translation are, at their core, explorations of intercultural dialogue. As Hua Xianfa^[4] notes, cultural filtering in translation manifests in various forms such as transformation, adaptation, amplification, and annotation. Other scholars argue that cultural filtering functions much like imitation, guided by principles of deletion, reshaping, and condensation^[5]. Generally, cultural filtering processes in translation are made visible through strategies such as addition, omission, mistranslation, or distortion. These strategies reflect the translator's interpretive stance and creative agency. Rather than acting as a passive conveyor of source content, the translator engages in a dynamic act of meaning-making, shaping the reader's reception through culturally conditioned decisions.

3. An overview of the English translation of *The Family*

The Family is one of Ba Jin's most representative works from the May Fourth Movement. Written in the wake of this cultural and intellectual awakening, the novel offers a critical reflection on traditional family ethics and expresses the era's growing desire for individual freedom and social reform^[6]. The earliest partial translation was produced by Wang Jizhen, while Sidney Shapiro's 1958 version—entitled *The Family*—was the first complete English edition and drew significant international attention. Shapiro, a Chinese citizen originally from the United States, was educated in the West. After arriving in China in 1947, he developed a deep appreciation for Chinese culture and later adopted Chinese nationality. This dual identity shaped his cultural perspective, enabling him to approach the text from both insider and outsider viewpoints. It also laid a foundation for a translation that balances accuracy with accessibility. As Ren Dongsheng points out, Shapiro not only acted as a key agent in China's external cultural communication but also embedded his political commitments within his translation practice^[7]. Ba Jin's *The Family* was composed in close connection with its time, and Shapiro's translation reflects this by selectively filtering, abridging, and adapting certain passages to suit the cultural expectations of English readers. A detailed comparison of the source and translated texts reveals the strategies of cultural filtering at play, as well as the impact of the translator's identity and the socio-political context on his translation decisions. This underscores the broader significance of examining the interplay between translation, ideology, and cross-cultural transmission.

4. An analysis of cultural filtering in Shapiro's translation of *The Family*

4.1. Expansion of source text information

This novel recreates the life of a traditional Chinese extended family in the early 1920s, containing numerous descriptions that reflect elements of Chinese cultural practices. In his translation, Shapiro was acutely aware of the vast cultural gap between the source and target languages and cultures. He supplemented the translation with background information and explanatory notes in several places, effectively highlighting the cultural characteristics of the source text. For example, in the passage:

“这跟他们有什么关系 况且你又不是我们家里的人!” 觉慧半惊讶半愤怒地说。“你们不知道为了我进一女师, 妈受到了不少的闲气”^[8]

“What have they got to do with you? Going to school is your own affair. Besides, you’re not a member of our family!” Chueh-hui was a little surprised that Chin should have mentioned his family. Although Chin’s mother was a daughter of the Venerable Master Kao, when she married, she came under the jurisdiction of her husband’s family, according to custom, and she no longer had any say in the affairs of her original home.”^[9]

“觉新刚拈了香从外面把灶神接进来送回到厨房里去, 然后回到堂屋里来。”^[8]

“Chueh-hsin had been out carrying a lighted incense stick to the kitchen, symbolizing the Kitchen God’s return after his annual New Year’s report to Heaven on the way the family had been conducting itself.”^[9]

In both examples, the translator expands on cultural references: the former adds clarification on the Chinese custom of patrilocal residence, while the latter explains the symbolic meaning of the Kitchen God’s ritual during the Lunar New Year. These culturally embedded annotations reflect a form of cultural filtering through which surface meanings are preserved, and deeper cultural significance is effectively conveyed.

As a translator with a bi-cultural background, Shapiro was educated in the West and later integrated himself into Chinese society after arriving in China. His growing familiarity with Chinese customs is evidenced in his own words^[10]: “My feelings and thoughts toward China have evolved—from the confusion and naive I experienced upon first arriving, to a gradual integration with Chinese culture and life, and eventually, a deepening emotional connection.” This unique positioning gave him a natural advantage in negotiating cultural filtering. Numerous other examples in *The Family* illustrate his deliberate use of explanatory additions to reduce cross-cultural comprehension barriers while retaining as much cultural specificity as possible, thereby achieving effective transmission of cultural meaning.

4.2. Omission and modification of source text information

Yan Jinsi^[11] notes, “Reception is in itself a form of criticism. Every act of reception involves deliberate or unconscious choices on the part of the recipient.” Language carries culture, and the historical, cultural, and literary connotations embedded in different languages often give rise to shifts in cultural imagery. This novel contains references to folk customs and classical poetry, which posed a certain challenge even to a bi-cultural translator like Shapiro.

4.2.1. Omission of drinking game culture

The culture of drinking games (酒令, *jiuling*) is an essential part of traditional Chinese alcohol customs, often referenced in classical poetry and literature. In Chapter 13 (pages 97–100), a vivid depiction of New Year’s Eve drinking games—including the poetic game “*feihualing*” (飞花令) and a tongue-twister challenge—was omitted in its entirety, totaling 1,962 characters in the original. The passage includes 11 lines of poetry and 7 aliases of characters from *Outlaws of the Marsh*, making the section linguistically and culturally complex. Notably, Shapiro was also translating *Outlaws of the Marsh* around the same time, suggesting he was well-versed in the cultural material. However, perhaps in consideration of Western readers’ receptivity and the translation’s broader cultural communication goals, he chose to omit the passage. This editorial decision, though pragmatic, unfortunately resulted in a certain degree of cultural loss in the transmission of Chinese traditions.

4.2.2. Misrepresentation of calligraphy and painting culture

The novel’s references to calligraphy and painting also underwent partial mistranslation or cultural dilution in

the English version. A comparison of the source and target texts reveals that Chinese terms such as “匾额” (horizontal inscribed board), “木对联” (wooden couplets), and “画屏” (painted screen) were all translated as “plaque” (see **Table 1**). In Chinese, “匾额” refers to horizontal boards often displayed above doors or under eaves, and “画屏” refers specifically to decorative folding screens painted with traditional art. These are not interchangeable in the source culture. In contrast, “plaque” in English typically refers to a flat plate or nameplate and does not capture the artistic or functional specificity of the original items. This discrepancy may stem from the lack of equivalent terms in English cultural discourse, which led to varying degrees of mistranslation or cultural simplification. Similar cases include terms like “书画” (calligraphy and painting) and “字画” (calligraphy and artwork), which in some instances were rendered simply as “book.” The calligraphic meaning of “字” was omitted altogether. As a result, the depth of Chinese visual and literary arts embedded in these expressions was only partially transmitted, filtered through the translator’s interpretive lens and the constraints of the target language environment. **Tables 1** and **2** illustrate selected examples of cultural misrepresentation in the translation of calligraphy-related terms.

Table 1. Translation of “匾额” and related decorative terms

Source text	Target text
檐下挂了一块匾额，上面三个黑色隶书大字 (Chapter 14)	A horizontal plaque over its door bore the building’s name. The inscription had been written by their uncle Ke-an.
一副木对联红漆底子上现出八个隶书黑字 (Chapter 1)	red veneered plaques inscribed with black ideographs
上面嵌了一些大理石画屏 (Chapter 14)	with plaques of decorative marble

Table 2. Translation of “书画” and “字画” in context

Source text	Target text
喜欢收藏书画 (Chapter 4)	an epicure of ancient books and paintings
赏玩书画 (Chapter 9)	elegant tastes in books and paintings
鉴赏彼此收藏的书画和古玩 (Chapter 12)	displaying his prized books and paintings , his antiques
里面的字画和陈设 (Chapter 14)	the room’s furnishings and the paintings
偷了老太爷的字画拿出去卖 (Chapter 15)	stole some pictures belonging to the Venerable Master Kao
不把古玩字画拿出来分，这样分家还是不彻底 (Chapter 23)	without touching the antiques and pictures isn’t a thorough division!

Based on a comparative analysis of the source and translated texts, it is evident that the translator adopted cultural filtering strategies such as omission and abridged translation in handling drinking-game culture and calligraphy-related elements, which led to a certain degree of information loss and cultural dilution. This outcome was mainly influenced by his bi-cultural identity^[12]. The use of classical poetry and references to literary works in the context of drinking games poses considerable difficulty for Western readers. Therefore, the translator adopted various forms of cultural filtering from the perspective of target audience acceptability.

In addition, the inherent complexity of traditional Chinese culture, along with the translator’s limited understanding of certain cultural elements during the early stage of translation, made it difficult to fully and accurately comprehend these traditions^[13]. As a result, the translator encountered challenges when rendering culturally specific elements, and some instances of mistranslation occurred. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the translation should be dismissed outright. Xie Tianzhen^[14] divides mistranslation into unintentional and

intentional types, and points out that mistranslation often results in the loss or distortion of information, as well as misunderstanding or misreading of the source text, but it is not entirely without value. Therefore, the mistranslations found in Shapiro's version of *The Family* are to some extent inevitable and should be regarded as a cultural phenomenon deserving critical reflection.

5. Conclusion

In Shapiro's English translation of *The Family*, the translator made modifications to the source text primarily through two major strategies: addition and omission, both of which reflect cultural filtering. On the basis of fidelity to the original text, Shapiro expanded certain information in light of the needs of promoting Chinese culture abroad. In addition, under the combined influence of Western readers' reception capacity and his own bi-cultural background, the translator selectively omitted or abridged portions of the original text, which unfortunately led to the partial loss of cultural elements related to drinking-game culture and traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy. In some cases, cultural imagery was even mistranslated. Shapiro's translation decisions were shaped by multiple cultural filtering processes involving traditional culture, the socio-historical context, and other complex factors. In literary exchange and dialogue, the reception and influence of any foreign literary work are inevitably shaped by the cultural filtering mechanisms of the receiving culture^[15]. Cultural filtering also has its positive aspects. In a cross-cultural context, it is the result of dialogue, negotiation, and eventual compromise between cultures. It may lead to a reduction in the conveyed meaning of the original text, but it can also give rise to new literary qualities through creative adaptation.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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