From a Study on Translation Strategies for Culture-Loaded Words of ZIZHITONGJIAN from the Perspective of Eco-translatology

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Abstract: ZIZHITONGJIAN is a key historical work that reflects not only political events but also many culture-loaded expressions rooted in traditional Chinese life. These expressions, including official titles, ritual words, and historical references, carry strong cultural meaning that is hard to translate. And these words are often described as culture-loaded words. Previous research on ZIZHITONGJIAN has offered valuable insights into its translation, focusing on general strategies, historical context, or selected passages. However, these discussions often remain broad in scope, lacking systematic comparison across different types of English editions. This study uses Hu Gengshen's eco-translatology theory to explore how these culture-loaded words are handled in three kinds of English editions by listing out some classical examples. By applying eco-translatology, this study identifies common translation issues across different English editions and offers a methodological reference for future research on classical Chinese texts, especially in handling culture-loaded words with greater cultural and communicative sensitivity.

Keywords: Eco-translatology; Culture-loaded words; ZIZHITONGJIAN; Translation strategy; 3D transformation model

1. Background

Culturally-loaded words, also known as "lexical gaps", refer to words that carry cultural information in the source language but do not have a counterpart in the target language [1]. Liao Qiyi defines culturally-loaded words as words, phrases, and idioms that mark something unique to a certain culture in a specific historical process [2]. Because the communication between cultures is increasing, the broadcast of classical historical works is critical for fostering foreign understanding of China. Compiled by Sima Guang and completed in 1084 CE, *ZIZHITONGJIAN* stands as China's first continuous annalistic history, across 1,362 years from the Warring States to the Five Dynasties. As a paradigm of traditional Chinese historical writing, *ZIZHITONGJIAN* is famous as "the consummate chronicle" and "a textbook of governance," and its hybrid narrative of annals and

biographies has a great influence on following historiography [3]. Although several English selections and full-text translations exist, the length and archaic style of the original, as well as the abundance of culture-loaded words, have so far resisted systematic translation.

With the 3D transformation model of eco-translatology, translators can translate *ZIZHITONGJIAN*'s culture-loaded words across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions [4]. A comparative analysis of existing English editions combined with target-reader feedback makes it possible to find out strategies that both preserve the work's cultural speciality and align with Anglophone conventions. This ecological translation approach offers opportunities for classical historical texts to be more accessible to global audiences.

2. Culture-loaded words and core theories of eco-translatology

2.1. Threefold challenges in translating culture-loaded words

Culture-loaded words denote culture-specific nouns, customary expressions, and literary allusions that lack direct equivalents in the target language. Their translation typically encounters:

Referential Gaps: absence of a corresponding concept in the target language.

Semantic Shifts: literal renderings risk omitting layered cultural connotations or causing misinterpretation.

Acceptability Hurdles: the translated form may disrupt the target-culture reader's fluency or expectations.

For example, words such as "keju" (imperial examination), "junxian" (prefecture–county system), and "yiguan" (literati garb) have institutional, administrative and ritual meanings. These words can neither be accurately translated by their Chinese pronunciation nor by their literal meanings; their cultural values must be conveyed through contextual or adaptive strategies [5].

2.2. The 3D transformation model

Eco-translatology, created by Professor Hu Gengshen, treats translation as an adaptive selection process, drawing on Darwinian notions of "survival of the fittest." The translation ecosystem refers to "the world presented by the original, the original and the target language, that is, the whole of language, communication, culture, society, and the interconnection and interaction of authors, readers, and clients" [6]. The theory of ecological translation emphasizes the interpretation of translation from the perspective of the translator, so it is necessary to judge the situation and choose the good when translating [7]. Upon entering the translational ecosystem, the translator must accommodate the source text's demands and the target context's elements, wisely choosing among alternatives to balance faithfulness, readability, cultural representation, and communicative efficacy.

2.3. The model's core lies in the 3D transformation

(1) Linguistic Dimension: optimizing lexical and syntactic choices for clarity and fidelity.

(2) Cultural Dimension: compensating for and reproducing cultural connotations through annotations, paraphrases, or supplemental context.

(3) Communicative Dimension: translation depends on the target audience's understanding abilities, reading habits, and cultural expectations, so the text "lives" naturally in the receptor culture without losing its original flavor.

At the same time, each dimension, level, and aspect of translation has a variety of different contents that are interconnected and influenced by each other [8].

3. Evaluation criteria for English editions

To rigorously compare how different English translations handle culture-loaded words, this study adopts a tripartite quality-assessment framework [9]:

(1) Equivalence: the degree to which the translation conveys both information and cultural nuances, guided by Nida's "dynamic/functional equivalence" principle [10].

(2) Readability: fluency, syntactic smoothness, and appropriate terminology usage, ensuring an engaging reading experience.

(3) Acceptability: conformity with target-language norms, stylistic conventions, and cultural expectations, avoiding alienation of the reader or distortion of source culture.

Under this lens, we will systematically analyze translation strategies, including literal rendering, paraphrase, transliteration, and annotation, across multiple editions, seeking an ecologically balanced approach that honors both text and audience.

4. Corpus scope

This study centers on some culture-loaded words from *ZIZHITONGJIAN* that convey key facets of ancient Chinese political institutions, social systems, and ritual customs. The selected items fall into four categories:

4.1. Administrative terminology

As a chronologically structured universal history, the *ZIZHITONGJIAN* meticulously records the rise and fall of regimes and the evolution of governmental institutions across sixteen dynasties, from the Warring States period through the Five Dynasties. Numerous technical words in it indicate territorial divisions and official ranks, thus these words not only signal the mechanisms of state power but also encapsulate broader patterns of social organization and cultural identity.

Examination of representative designations such as "junxian", "fanshu", and "zhoumu" elucidates the dynamic interplay between central and local authorities, between Han-Chinese polities and their non-Han vassals, and reveals the Song dynasty's nuanced reception and adaptation of earlier administrative models. Such terminology thus furnishes translators with a rich cultural matrix, demanding careful consideration of both form and context. Detailed descriptions of these words' cultural significance are followed.

Firstly, junxian ("Commanderies and Counties"). Qin Shi Huang's abolition of feudal fiefs in favor of junxian established a two-tiered, centrally administered framework that endured as the bedrock of imperial governance. Under this system, county magistrates wielded executive authority at the local level, while prefectural governors (taishou) oversaw clusters of counties. This structure not only manifestly centralized power but also implicitly upholds a tension between imperial oversight and local autonomy. A duality that translators must preserve to convey accurately the hierarchical stratification of the ancient polity.

Secondly, fanshu ("Vassal States"). From the Tang through the Song dynasties, the imperial court often employed a policy of jimi ("loose rein") to incorporate neighboring non-Han regimes as fanshu. These semi-autonomous entities acknowledged suzerainty through tribute and investiture yet retained a significant degree of autonomy. The fanshu system thus exemplified a hybrid diplomatic paradigm, one that balanced military expediency with ritualized hierarchy, and translators must render "fanshu" in a way that captures both its political subordination and its pragmatic latitude.

Thirdly, zhoumu ("Regional Governor" or "Military Governor"). Instituted in the early Han and recalibrated under successive dynasties, the office of zhoumu originally conferred broad civil and military

responsibilities over a large territorial jurisdiction. By the Song era, the role had become more ceremonial, often occupied by scholar-officials who administered both civilian affairs and defense matters. A precise translation must therefore reconcile the word's martial origins with its evolving bureaucratic function, ensuring that readers appreciate its compound nature as both guardian and administrator of the frontier provinces.

These three administrative designations recur with high frequency throughout the *ZIZHITONGJIAN* and each embodies distinct dimensions of political praxis and cultural symbolism. In translating them, one must invoke an eco-translational approach, which simultaneously weigh linguistic fidelity, cultural resonance, and reader engagement, to select among literal rendering, adaptive paraphrase, or supplemented annotation. Such methodological rigor ensures that the English version remains both true to the original text and intelligible to an international scholarly audience.

4.2. Imperial examinations and tribute words

These words in *ZIZHITONGJIAN* not only underpin the mechanisms of elite recruitment and state finance but also reflect broader configurations of social mobility and centralized authority in imperial China. Selection criteria included words "frequency", "representativeness" for the underlying institution, and "variation" in translation strategies across existing English versions.

(1) Keju (Imperial Examination)

Definition: Originating in 605 CE under the Sui dynasty, the civil service or imperial examination system provided a standardized, merit-based pathway into the bureaucracy, culminating in the three-stage process of "xiangshi" (provincial exam), "huishi" (metropolitan exam), and "dianshi" (palace exam) by the Tang era; it endured, with only minor interruptions, until its abolition in 1905 CE.

Cultural Significance: Beyond furnishing a mechanism for social mobility, which means allowing individuals of modest origins to attain elite status, the examination system served as a conduit for Confucian orthodoxy, shaping the intellectual and moral foundations of the scholar-official class not only in China but throughout East Asia.

(2) Gongfu (Tribute and Taxation)

Definition: The "gongfu" apparatus comprised both in-kind tribute (e.g., grain, silk) and monetary taxation, operating as the linchpin of imperial revenue. From the Han dynasty's early "food and commodity" levies to the Sui-Tang "one-whip" reforms and the later Ming-Qing amalgamation of land tax, corvée, and miscellaneous levies, this system evolved to balance state extraction with market regulation.

Cultural Significance: State interventions, such as the "junshu" method (balanced delivery law), "pingzhun"(price stabilization), "hedi"(rice purchase), and "jinque" (monopoly control), illustrate the regime's dual aim of securing fiscal stability and mitigating price volatility in local markets, thus sustaining centralized control while managing social welfare.

4.3. Ritual and attire vocabulary

This subsection focuses on ritual and attire vocabulary in the *ZIZHITONGJIAN*, selecting some culture-loaded words that exemplify Confucian ceremonial norms and the sartorial expressions of the Scholar-official class. The following three categories are highlighted for their high frequency, rich cultural resonance, and substantial variation in existing English translations.

(1) Yiguan Ruya (Elegant in Robes and Caps)

Definition: The phrase yiguanruya literally describes individuals whose attire, including the Confucian scholar's robe (" 衣 ") and cap ("guan"), reflects both proper ceremonial dress and refined scholarly demeanor. It denotes erudition and dignified bearing among the literati class.

Cultural Significance: This expression embraces the Confucian ideal that external appearance must mirror internal virtue, thereby signaling membership in the "junzi" moral community. The ritual garments themselves served as visual shorthand for ethical cultivation and social rank in imperial courts and local assemblies.

(2) Chaohui (Court Assembly)

Definition: In the Chinese imperial system, "chaohui" refers to the formal morning assembly where the emperor met with high-ranking ministers to review state affairs. It forms the core of the palace's political-ritual calendar, mandating regular attendance and strict ceremonial order.

Cultural Significance: Court assemblies reinforced hierarchical relationships between sovereign and subjects and enacted the Confucian notion of the ruler as "first gentleman" in service to the people. Variations in "chaohui", from grand seasonal convocations to routine daily audiences, also reflected shifts in administrative centralization and ritual emphasis across dynasties.

(3) Chaofu (Court Dress)

Definition: "chaofu" denotes the formal ceremonial attire worn by emperors and officials during "chaohui" and other state ceremonies. Typical components include the phoenix-patterned robe, formal cap, and sash, all regulated by sumptuary statutes to reflect rank and occasion.

Cultural Significance: Court dress functioned as a visual lexicon of authority and moral virtue, with specific patterns (e.g., Twelve Symbolic Emblems) encoding Imperial legitimacy. By its strict regulation, "chaofu" both maintained social stratification and embodied the Confucian ideal of harmonious ritual conduct.

These ritual and attire words recur throughout the *ZIZHITONGJIAN*, each carrying layered meanings that transcend mere wardrobe descriptions to encompass ethical, social, and cosmological dimensions.

4.4. Historical allusions and toponyms

In this part, the category of Historical Allusions and Geographic Landmarks encompasses entries imbued with profound cultural symbolism and geographic identity. By examining the translation choices for "Huashan Duel," "Luoyang," and the "the Battle of Changping," we elucidate how an eco-translatological framework, including linguistic precision, cultural contextualization, and communicative adaptability, can guide cross-cultural transmission of classical historiography.

(1) To begin with, Huashan Duel ("huashanlunjian")

Although the phrase "Huashan Duel" originates as a martial-arts trope and means the congregation of rival swordsmen atop Mount Hua, it evolved into a metaphor for rigorous intellectual or political debate. In the *ZIZHITONGJIAN*, while this precise idiom does not appear verbatim, invoking it in translation can vividly convey the spirit of policy-forming assemblies, where ministers engage in sharp-edged argumentation. A recommended rendering is "the Huashan Duel (literally, 'Huashan Contest of Swords')", accompanied by a footnote explaining its dual connotations in martial and rhetorical contexts. This approach secures terminological accuracy (linguistic dimension), supplies necessary background (cultural dimension), and offers readability for international scholars (communicative dimension).

(2) Luoyang

As one of China's oldest capitals, Luoyang served intermittently from the Western Zhou through the Tang dynasty as the nexus of imperial governance, economy, and culture. It stands as the archetypal emblem of Central Plains orthodoxy. Within the *ZIZHITONGJIAN*, Luoyang recurs as both a theater of political concourse and a strategic battleground—its name alone evoking corridors of courtly power and collective memory. In translation, one should retain the phonetic "Luoyang," appending on first occurrence "(ancient imperial capital of multiple dynasties on China's Central Plain)" to foreground its historical stature and geographic setting, thereby harmonizing fidelity, context, and reader orientation.

(3) The Battle of Changping ("changpingzhizhan")

Fought in 260 BCE between the states of Qin and Zhao, the Battle of Changping represents a turning point in the Warring States period, culminating in a decisive Qin victory that paved the way for China's ultimate unification. The *ZIZHITONGJIAN*'s detailed narrative emphasizes both the strategic acumen of figures and the staggering human cost. The phrase "the Battle of Changping" should be presented with an editorial note and, where possible, supplemented with a small inset map or footnote summarizing its scale and aftermath. This method maintains terminological clarity, enriches historical context, and maximizes accessibility for a global scholarly audience.

5. Outcome

In each case, translators are advised to apply the eco-translatology principle of 3D transformation:

(1) Linguistic Dimension: use precise, consistent terminology (literal renderings and standardized transliterations).

(2) Cultural Dimension: provide annotations or footnotes to compensate for background knowledge gaps (mythic, ritual, or historical layers).

(3) Communicative Dimension: adapt presentation to the conventions and expectations of international academic readership, ensuring the text remains both authoritative and engaging.

By integrating these strategies, one constructs an ecologically balanced translation that faithfully conveys both the factual record and the cultural resonance of China's seminal historical chronicle. Priority is given to high-frequency and semantically rich words exhibiting clear divergence across translations to ensure representativeness and comparability. To capture a spectrum of translational strategies, three principal English versions will be examined.

5.1. Historical-classic edition

(1) Translator: Wu Gaolin (Veteran translator, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs), 1990s full translation with parallel modern Chinese and English text;

(2) Profile: Emphasizes formal equivalence, predominantly literal translation with marginal notes; suited to specialist historians but less reader-friendly for lay audiences.

5.2. Scholarly Edition

(1) Items: selective volumes such as *Wars with the Xiongnu* from The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica and *ZIZHITONGJIAN*: Warring States and Qin, featuring English rendering plus expert commentary;

(2) Profile: Balances fidelity and fluidity through liberal use of paraphrase and scholarly footnotes; supports academic inquiry but disrupts continuity for sequential reading.

5.3. Popular-reader edition

(1) Publisher/Translator: Reader's Edition Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Governance, abridged by a translation team for general readership;

(2) Profile: Streamlines content via paraphrase and adaptive rewriting to enhance narrative appeal; accessible but at the expense of explicit cultural explication.

By coding and categorizing each word's treatment (literal translation, paraphrase, transliteration, annotation) and correlating these with reader-feedback surveys, we will assess strategy performance within the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions [11].

6. Conclusion

6.1. Key findings

A comparative analysis of some culture-loaded words across three representative English editions yields the following insights:

(1) Linguistic Strategies: The Historical-Classic Edition relies heavily on literal translation, preserving terminological accuracy but sacrificing fluidity; the Scholarly Edition integrates paraphrase with explanatory notes, achieving a balance between fidelity and readability; the Popular-Reader Edition favors paraphrase and adaptive rewriting to maximize narrative engagement for general readers.

(2) Cultural Compensation: For high-load words such as "keju" and "junxian", the Scholarly Edition's judicious use of footnotes and background commentary aids reader comprehension of institutional connotations; the Historical-Classic Edition's bare transliteration often leaves readers puzzled; the Popular-Reader Edition embeds explanations contextually, blending smooth reading with partial cultural transmission.

(3) Communicative Reception: Survey and interview data indicate that academic and cross-cultural scholars highly value the Scholarly Edition; mainstream readers show a clear preference for the Popular-Reader Edition; the Historical-Classic Edition appeals primarily to professional historians. These patterns reflect the communicative dimension of ecological adaptation.

6.2. Limitations

(1) Corpus Coverage: Focused on high-frequency words, the analysis does not encompass rare allusions or specialized idioms, which merit future inquiry.

(2) Edition Sample: Three editions offer a meaningful contrast and would enrich the comparative framework, including additional commercial, academic, and online translations, but represent a limited range;

(3) Evaluation Methods: Reliance on textual comparison and small-scale reader feedback limits the ability to quantify comprehension and engagement metrics; thus larger-scale empirical methods are needed.

6.3. Future directions

(1) Expanded Corpus and Editions: Incorporating a broader selection of volumes, more translator profiles, and versions in other languages (e.g., French, German, Japanese) to enhance cross-lingual perspectives.

(2) Multimodal Evaluation: Employing eye-tracking experiments, large-scale surveys, and digital analytics to quantify readers' cognitive load, comprehension speed, and affective responses, enabling robust assessment of communicative adaptation.

(3) Digital Humanities Tools: Leveraging corpus analysis platforms, machine-translation assistance, and terminology knowledge graphs for automated annotation and visualization of translation strategies.

(4) Ecological Edition Production: Developing an editorial workflow guided by 3D transformation principles, complete with translator guidelines and post-editing evaluation standards, to cultivate an adaptive English edition of *ZIZHITONGJIAN* that meaningfully serves diverse audiences.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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