

A Comparative Study on the Translation of Culture-Specific Items in *Yueyang Tower* — A Case Study of Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's and Luo Jingguo's English Translations

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doi:10.63593/JRSSH.2026.06.10

Abstract

Yueyang Tower is a famous piece of classical Chinese prose, and it contains many culture-specific items. Using Aixelá's theory of culture-specific items and Nida's cultural classification, this paper makes a comparison of the translation strategies in the English versions by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang and by Luo Jingguo, focusing on ecological, social and spiritual culture-specific items. The comparison shows that the Yangs kept the cultural images and sentence structures of the original text, while Luo used free translation, put fluency and readability first, and added notes to explain cultural information. These different choices came from different translation purposes and target readers, so the two versions achieved different degrees of balance between keeping cultural meaning and helping readers understand.

Keywords: *Yueyang Tower*, Culture-Specific Items, translation strategies, comparative translation study

1. Introduction

Fan Zhongyan (989-1052) was a famous statesman and writer in the Northern Song Dynasty, and he wrote the well-known prose piece *Yueyang Tower*. This article has only a little more than 300 characters, but it combines scenery description, personal feelings and philosophical thinking very well. It first describes the great view of Dongting Lake, and then ends with two famous sayings: "not elated by external gains, nor saddened by personal losses" and "be the first to bear the world's worries and the last to enjoy its pleasures." These sayings show Fan Zhongyan's own ideal and moral character, and

they have also become lasting symbols of the spiritual goals of Chinese scholar-officials for more than a thousand years. So *Yueyang Tower* is not just a landscape prose, it is also a cultural classic that contains Confucian political ideas and moral feelings.

Yueyang Tower has a lot of cultural meaning, so many translators have paid attention to it, and there are several English translations. The translation by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang and the one by Luo Jingguo are the most typical among them. The Yangs' translation was made as part of China's official work to introduce Chinese culture to English-speaking readers, and it is

known for being accurate and elegant. Luo Jingguo's translation is in his book *Selections from Classical Chinese Essays*, and it is mainly for Western readers who are interested in Chinese classical culture and also for Chinese people who want to learn English. This translation uses free translation and puts readability first. Because the translators have different cultural backgrounds, purposes, and target readers, their translations are good materials for comparative study.

Although *Yueyang Tower* is short, it has many culture-specific items, and these items cause special difficulties in translation. Translators not only need to find words that have the same meaning in the two languages, but also need to make the cultural meaning clear to readers in another culture. Because translators have different cultural backgrounds, translation purposes, and preferred strategies, they often use different methods to translate the same culture-specific items, and this leads to different results in how the culture is passed on.

This study uses Javier Franco Aixelá's theory about culture-specific items and E. A. Nida's way of classifying culture as the framework, and it compares how the Yangs and Luo translated the culture-specific items in *Yueyang Tower*. It looks at the different strategies and the effects on cultural transmission when they deal with ecological, social, and spiritual culture-specific items, and the purpose is to give some reference for how to treat culture-specific items in the English translation of classical Chinese prose.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Definition of Culture-Specific Items

In translation studies, the concept of culture-specific items is very important, because its definition directly affects how translators choose strategies and how target readers accept the text. The Spanish scholar Javier Franco Aixelá first put forward this term in 1996. He defined it as those items in the source text whose cultural meanings are hard to achieve equivalence in translation, because target readers are not familiar with the cultural background behind them (Aixelá, 1996: 58). Later many researchers used this clear and systematic definition as an analysis framework.

Different scholars have developed this idea from different perspectives. Mona Baker says that a concept is culture-specific when there is no equivalent in the target culture and it is related to things like religion or social customs (Baker, 1992). Peter Newmark uses the term "cultural

terms" and points out that such items are easy to cause wrong understanding if translated word by word, because their cultural features are very clear (Newmark, 2001). Liao Qiyi (2000) puts forward the idea of "culturally loaded words" and defines them as words, phrases, and idioms that mark culture-specific things of a certain culture. Bao Huinan (2004) adds that the main difficulty with culturally loaded words is that the target language cannot find the cultural information carried by the source language words.

Also, culture-specific items are not only words. Chen Tian (2016) clearly says that culture-specific items can appear as phrases, sentences, or even whole passages, not just at the lexical level. This opinion makes the research scope wider, and it is different from the idea of "culturally loaded words" which mainly focuses on words. This also gives a theoretical reason to analyze sentence-level cultural expressions like "not elated by external gains, nor saddened by personal losses" and "be the first to bear the world's worries and the last to enjoy its pleasures."

In short, culture-specific items have two main features. First, they have cultural uniqueness, which means the things they carry are special to the source culture and usually there are no direct matches in the target culture, so it creates a "cultural default." Second, they are hard to translate, because the target culture does not have fully corresponding concepts or expressions, so these items cannot be completely equivalent in form, meaning, or function during translation.

2.2 The Classification of Culture-Specific Items

In order to analyze the features of culture-specific items and adopt suitable translation strategies, a systematic classification is needed first. Different scholars have developed various classification methods based on different criteria. The American scholar E. A. Nida divides cultural factors into five kinds: ecological, material, social, religious, and linguistic (Nida, 1945: 196), while the British scholar Peter Newmark further divides culture into ecological culture, material culture, social culture, organizational and conceptual culture, and gestures and habits (Newmark, 2001: 95). Nida's classification has clear logic, wide coverage, and strong applicability, so it has been widely used in the academic field, and it gives an authoritative theoretical base for identifying and classifying culture-specific items. Chen Hongwei (2000)

divides culture into three types: material culture, institutional culture, and spiritual culture; Chen Tian (2016) further says that culture-specific items can be put into cognitive, normative, artistic, utilitarian, and social groups.

By comparison, Nida's classification is closest to the common academic understanding of culture. It covers cultural meanings quite completely, and its standards are consistent and the expression is simple, so it is especially suitable for systematically identifying and classifying culture-specific items in a text. So this study uses Nida's five-part framework as the analysis model. Based on the text features of *Yueyang Tower*, the culture-specific items found in it are mainly in three groups: ecological, social, and spiritual.

3. The Two English Translations of *Yueyang Tower*

Among the several English versions of *Yueyang Tower*, the one translated together by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang and the one by Luo Jingguo are the most representative, and these two versions are quite different in who the translators are, what their translation purposes are, and what strategies they use.

3.1 Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's Translation

Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang are a very influential translator couple in Chinese translation history. Starting from the 1940s, they worked together to translate more than 100 Chinese cultural and literary classic works into English, such as *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *Departing from Trouble*. Their translations are known for being accurate, vivid and elegant, and many Western scholars who study Chinese culture see their translations as classics.

When it comes to translation strategy, the Yangs mainly use a foreignization approach, with domestication as a supplement, trying to keep the meaning of the original text and also pay attention to readability. In their translation of *Yueyang Tower*, this approach is shown by their strong faithfulness to the sentence structure of the original. Studies that look at their translation have found that their translation often has long and complex sentences, which makes it harder to read. In practice, they often use literal translation, and also literal translation with notes, trying to pass on Chinese culture in a real way to Western readers.

3.2 Luo Jingguo's Translation

Luo Jingguo is a professor at the School of Foreign Languages of Peking University, and he is also a well-known translation scholar in China today. He chose thirty-two representative prose pieces from *Gems of Classical Chinese Prose*, translated them into English, and published them as a book called *Selections from Classical Chinese Essays*. His translation is mainly for Western readers who are interested in Chinese classical culture, and also for Chinese readers who want to learn classical Chinese through English translations.

As for translation strategy, Luo prefers free translation, and he puts more attention on fluency and readability. Studies that look at his translation show that he uses a wide range of vocabulary, his sentences are short, and the words are easy to understand. In his translation of *Yueyang Tower*, Luo adds notes to culture-specific items like "the fourth year of Qingli" and "Baling Prefecture," and this helps readers understand the historical and cultural background behind them.

4. A Comparative Analysis of Culture-Specific Items in the English Translations of *Yueyang Tower*

When translating *Yueyang Tower* into English, Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang and Luo Jingguo use different translation principles and methods, so there are clear differences between their versions. This study follows Nida's cultural classification, puts the culture-specific items in *Yueyang Tower* into three groups—ecological, social, and spiritual, and chooses representative examples from each group for comparison. The aim is to look at the different strategies used by the two translators and how well cultural meaning is transmitted.

4.1 Ecological Culture-Specific Items

Ecological culture-specific items mainly mean cultural expressions about geography, climate, plants and animals, and similar things (Nida, 1945). Since *Yueyang Tower* is set around Dongting Lake, it is full of natural images and descriptions of plants and animals, and two examples, "岸芷汀兰" and "锦鳞," are analyzed below.

Example 1: 岸芷汀兰

Source Text: 岸芷汀兰

Yang's Translation: the iris and orchids on the banks

Luo's Translation: The sweet-smelling grass by

the banks and the faintly scented orchids on the sandy beaches

This line describes the fragrant plants growing along the shores of Dongting Lake, and “芷” refers to a kind of plant with a pleasant smell, which Chinese writers often used as a symbol of good moral character. Yang translates “芷” as “iris”, keeping a specific plant image, but this plant name is not exactly correct. Luo translates it as “sweet-smelling grass”, keeping the main cultural feature of fragrance without using the exact plant name. The two choices show different concerns: the first one cares about the accuracy of the image, while the second one cares more about passing on the mood.

Example 2: 锦鳞

Source Text: 锦鳞游泳

Yang’s Translation: fish with scales like glimmering silk disport themselves in the water.

Luo’s Translation: Fishes of varied hues are swimming merrily in the water.

“锦鳞” (literally “brocade scales”) shows both the many fish in Dongting Lake and the old Chinese habit of comparing natural scenes to silk cloth. Yang keeps the word “scales” and adds “like glimmering silk” to show the texture and shine of “brocade”, so the rhetorical image of using scales to stand for fish and the silk-related image are both kept. Luo, on the other hand, translates the phrase as “fishes of varied hues”, plainly saying the fish have different colors, without keeping “scales” as a figure of speech or bringing out the texture of brocade. In this difference, Yang puts more value on sending the complete rhetorical image, while Luo puts more value on clear meaning and brief expression.

4.2 Social Culture-Specific Items

Social culture-specific items mean the special objects, concepts, or expressions that are connected to a certain social and cultural background. These items usually show the customs, institutions, behavior rules, or values of a society, and they have deep cultural meanings and historical importance (Jin & Zhang, 2025). In *Yueyang Tower*, there are many expressions about old Chinese social systems and cultural identities. Two examples, “迁客骚人” and “庆历四年,” are analyzed below.

Example 1: 迁客骚人

Source Text: 迁客骚人，多会于此

Yang’s Translation: many exiles and wandering

poets gather here.

Luo’s Translation: Exiled officials and poets often gather here.

“迁客” means officials who were sent away to far places, and “骚人” means poets, a term comes from Qu Yuan’s *Li Sao* and later was used for literary men. This phrase carries the cultural weight of old China’s tradition of banished officials and its literary history. Yang translates “迁客” as “exiles,” which stresses the state of being banished, and “骚人” as “wandering poets,” keeping the idea of drifting. Luo translates “迁客” as “Exiled officials,” making the official position clear, but he only translates “骚人” as “poets,” without showing its literary allusion. Yang’s version pays more attention to the literary side of the scholar-official identity, while Luo’s pays more attention to its social and institutional side.

Example 2: 庆历四年

Source Text: 庆历四年春，滕子京谪守巴陵郡

Yang’s Translation: In the spring of the fourth year of the reign of Qingli, Teng Zijing was banished from the capital to be governor of Baling Prefecture.

Luo’s Translation: In the spring of the fourth year of Qingli (1), Teng Zijing was exiled to Baling Prefecture to be the prefect there. Note (1): Qingli was the title of Emperor Renzong’s reign of the Song Dynasty.

“庆历” was the reign title of Emperor Renzong of the Song Dynasty. Using reign titles to mark years was a special way of recording time in imperial China. Yang keeps “the reign of Qingli,” and the word “reign” shows that Qingli was an imperial era name, but he gives no more explanation. Luo leaves out “reign” and simply writes “the fourth year of Qingli,” but he adds a footnote to explain the historical background of the reign title. Yang chooses to pass cultural information through wording inside the text, while Luo fills cultural gaps through notes outside the text, and these are two different ways to deal with cultural compensation.

4.3 Spiritual Culture-Specific Items

Spiritual culture shows up through the forms and products of human intellectual activities, including values, ways of thinking, aesthetic feelings, moral emotions, religious beliefs, and also achievements in philosophy, science, and literature and art (Li & Du, 2020). The most important cultural value of *Yueyang Tower* is that

it expresses Confucian political ideals and a philosophical view of life. Two examples, “不以物喜，不以己悲” and “先天下之忧而忧，后天下之乐而乐，” are analyzed below.

Example 1: 不以物喜，不以己悲

Source Text: 不以物喜，不以己悲

Yang’s Translation: The reason, perhaps, may be this: natural beauty was not enough to make them happy, nor their own situation enough to make them sad.

Luo’s Translation: The reason is that they were not thrown into ecstasies over their success, nor felt depressed over their failures.

This line shows the ideal spiritual state of the Confucian scholar-official that Fan Zhongyan supported, which means one should not be happy or sad because of outside things or personal luck. Yang translates “物” as “natural beauty” and turns the double negative into “not enough to make...”, which makes the original meaning weaker. Luo translates “物” as “success” and “己” as “failures”, turning an abstract philosophical idea into personal gain and loss. Both translators use different ways of making things specific, with Yang’s version paying more attention to the aesthetic side of the scholar-official’s connection with nature, while Luo’s version goes toward a more general idea of success and failure. These two ways of understanding cause different effects in cultural transmission.

Example 2: 先天下之忧而忧，后天下之乐而乐

Source Text: 其必曰：“先天下之忧而忧，后天下之乐而乐矣！”

Yang’s Translation: No doubt they are concerned before anyone else and enjoy themselves only after everyone else finds enjoyment.

Luo’s Translation: They would say: “To be the first in the country to worry about the affairs of the state and the last to enjoy oneself.”

This line is the central message of *Yueyang Tower*, and it contains Fan Zhongyan’s political ideal of taking the world as his own responsibility. In Chinese culture, “天下” not only means the geographical area but also has political meanings like “the state” and the people-centered idea of “all under heaven”. Yang translates “天下” as “anyone else”, which weakens its state-related meaning and turns the big political vision into a general moral idea of “selflessness”, while Luo translates it as “the country”, keeping the

national-political side of “天下”, and he adds “the affairs of the state” to make clear what they worry about. The difference between the two versions shows the choice between “making the expression universal” and “keeping the cultural context” when translating very condensed philosophical and political statements.

5. Conclusion

This study uses Aixelá’s theory of culture-specific items and Nida’s cultural classification as the framework, and it compares how Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang and Luo Jingguo translated the culture-specific items in *Yueyang Tower*. The results show that the two translators use different strategies for ecological, social, and spiritual culture-specific items. For ecological culture-specific items, Yang’s translation keeps the rhetorical images and aesthetic information of the original, while Luo’s uses free translation to make the meaning clear. For social culture-specific items, Yang’s translation pays more attention to passing on the literati identity and cultural meanings, but Luo’s pays more attention to adding cultural background through notes. For spiritual culture-specific items, Yang’s translation tends to use universal expressions to reduce reading difficulties, while Luo’s puts more effort on keeping the cultural context. These differences suggest that the Yangs take being faithful to Chinese culture as the main goal, trying to show the original sentence structures and cultural images completely, while Luo Jingguo cares more about the reading experience of target readers, using free translation, simplification, and notes to lower reading barriers.

From the perspective of cultural spread, both translators strike different levels of balance between reader understanding and keeping cultural meaning, and their strategy choices are affected by many things like their cultural identities, translation purposes, and target readers. This study has some reference value for how to deal with culture-specific items in the English translation of classical Chinese prose.

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