

Translator Behavior in the English Translations of the Kangba Writers: A Case Study of Culturally Loaded Terms in *Khams-pa* and *The Secluded Face*

Fangchao Li

Kangba Culture Research Center of Sichuan Minzu College, Sichuan Minzu College, Kangding, Sichuan, China

Abstract: The literary works of the Khams-pa writers, as a vital component of contemporary Chinese ethnic minority literature, play a crucial role in China's strategy for cultural dissemination abroad. This paper focuses on the English translations of Da Zhen's *Khams-pa* and Ge Rong Zhuimei's *The Secluded Face*, selecting five frequently occurring culturally loaded terms from each to explore the translators' strategies and behavioral patterns. Findings indicate that within a collaborative translation framework, foreign translators primarily shape the target language expressions, while native translators undertake the cultural interpretation. This division of labor results in a predominantly domesticated translation approach, complemented by selective foreignization. The translators' behaviors are characterized by a pragmatic commitment to practicality balanced with faithfulness. However, this model also leads to cultural loss and selective omission. By examining the inherent challenges of translating local language cultural features alongside the collaborative translation dynamics, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon and offers recommendations for improving the foreign-language translation of works by the Khams-pa writers.

Keywords: Khams-pa Writers; Khams-pa; *The Secluded Face*; Culturally Loaded Terms; Translator Behavior

1. Introduction

The Khams-pa writers has emerged in recent years as a distinctive literary force within the Chinese literary scene. Represented by authors such as Da Zhen, Ge Rong Zhuimei, and Yixi Zeren, the Khams-pa writers employ Chinese to narrate the historical memories and cultural

experiences of the Khams-pa region, thereby accomplishing a significant shift from "other-written" to "self-written" representation of Zangzu culture. In 2015, English translations of three major novels, including Da Zhen's *Khams-pa* and Ge Rong Zhuimei's *The Secluded Face*, were published by the China Translation & Publishing House as part of the Reading China: Xizang Youth Writers Series, marking the formal introduction of Khams-pa literature to the English-speaking world [1]. However, the English translation of the Khams-pa writers' works faces a fundamental challenge: culturally loaded terms embedded within the texts carry unique Xizang historical memories, religious beliefs, and modes of life for which direct equivalents are often absent in English. The translation of culturally loaded terms such as "Guozhuang" (a traditional Xizang dance), "Tusi" (local chieftain), and "Weisang" (ritual incense offering) is not merely a matter of semantic transfer but also one of constructing and conveying cultural identity. Existing scholarship has predominantly explored Xizang cultural terms' translation strategies from theoretical perspectives such as relevance theory and cognitive translation studies [2]. Some researchers have further examined the English translations of Khams-pa-related texts from a practical standpoint; [3,4] however, little research has focused on translator behaviors—especially the behavioral features and their underlying motivations in the context of collaborative translation.

This paper selects the English versions of *Khams-pa* and *The Secluded Face* as case studies. From each work, five high-frequency culturally loaded terms are extracted and their translation strategies analyzed. By considering both the distinctive features of Xizang culture and the dynamics of translators' collaborative behaviors, this study seeks to illuminate the factors driving strategy selection and ultimately

provide valuable insights for the foreign-language translation of the works of the Khams-pa writers.

2. High-Frequency Culturally Loaded Terms and Their English Translation Strategies in the Two Works

2.1 Translation of Culturally Loaded Terms in Khams-pa

Set against the backdrop of Kangding, Khams-pa vividly chronicles the intricate historical entanglements among three families in the Khams-pa region. The culturally loaded terms in the novel center mainly on institutional culture, religious culture, and daily life [5].

1. Guozhuang

“Guozhuang” constitutes a core cultural motif in Khams-pa. In Xizang language, it originally refers to an intermediary hub formed during the Tea Horse Market era, integrating warehousing, lodging, and trading functions. The novel describes: “The dozens of Guozhuang throughout Kangding form the solid foundation supporting the Yundeng family”. The English translation adopts a transliteration supplemented by an explanatory note upon first mention: Guozhuang, a place with buildings enclosed by walls where businesses gather to make deals [6].

Thereafter, “Guozhuang” is used alone. This strategy preserves the cultural specificity by foregrounding the native term, while compensating for semantic opacity through annotation—indicative of a primarily foreignizing approach, augmented by compensatory explanation.

2. Chieftain

“Tusi” refers to the hereditary local official appointed by the central dynasties since the Yuan and Ming periods in southwestern and northwestern ethnic regions. In the English version, it is rendered as “Chieftain” [6]. This reveals a clear semantic shift: “Chieftain” implies a tribal leader whose authority derives from kinship, whereas “Tusi” denotes an institutionalized office embodying political legitimacy and hereditary privilege within state governance. The choice of “Chieftain” simplifies the concept under a “functional equivalence” strategy but diminishes its institutional nuances.

3. Zanba

Zanba is the staple food of Xizang people made from roasted barley flour. The translation

employs transliteration without annotation: “zanba” [6]. This assumes readers can infer its referent through contextual cues, as zanba frequently co-occurs with butter tea and curds, providing sufficient contextual grounding.

4. Burn Incense

“Weisang” denotes a distinctive religious ritual in Xizang involving the burning of juniper branches to produce smoke offerings to the deities. The translation opts for a functional equivalence rendering: “burn incense” [6]. While this communicates the ritual act, the phrase “burn incense” tends to evoke Buddhist or Christian practices in English, thus filtering out the unique syncretism of Bon and Zangzu Buddhism intrinsic to Weisang.

5. Lyrics of Kangding Love Song

The novel quotes adapted lines from the folk song “Kangding Love Song”: “Shì jiè liú liú de nǚ zǐ , rén wǒ liú liú de ài yō”. The English translation reads: All the women in the world can be my lover and all the men in the world can be my wooer [6]. This is an idiomatic adaptation employing “lover” and “wooer” to create rhyme and clarity, facilitating the target audience’s reception of the song’s romantic atmosphere. However, the original dialectal reduplication “liu liu de” is omitted, sacrificing local flavor for readability.

2.2 English Translation of Culturally Loaded Terms in the Secluded Face

The Secluded Face employs the dual perspective of the “Son of God” to unveil the transformations experienced by a Khams-pa village, interweaving a wealth of mythological, ritualistic, and religious concepts within its narrative [7].

1. Son of God/Deity

The term “Shenzi” serves as the narrator’s self-identifier—both the progeny of the divine and an observer through mortal eyes. The translation renders it as “Son of God” or “Son of Deity”, contingent upon context [8]. This approach leverages the Christian theological concept of the “Son of God” to forge a cognitive anchor for the target audience but risks triggering unintended religious connotations. The collaborative translators’ choice reflects a pragmatic tendency to rely upon conceptual frameworks familiar to the target readership.

2. Wind Horse / Lungta

“Fengma” symbolizes life force and auspicious fortune within Xizang culture and is commonly

depicted on prayer flags. The translators employ a hybrid strategy combining the literal translation “Wind Horse” with the Xizang language transliteration “Lungta” as a supplementary term [8]. This dual approach balances semantic conveyance with preservation of cultural identity.

3. Guru Rinpoche

Guru Rinpoche is the revered founder of the Nyingma school of Zangzu Buddhism. Rather than adopting the conventional Sanskrit-derived epithet “Padmasambhava”, the translation opts for the Xizang language transliteration “Guru Rinpoche” [8]. This choice epitomizes respect for indigenous nomenclature, as within Xizang language contexts “Guru Rinpoche” is the preferred appellation embodying profound cultural and religious resonance.

4. Prayer Wheel

The “Zhuanjingtong” is translated as “prayer wheel” [8], exemplifying a domestication strategy. The term “prayer” anchors the object’s function in supplication, yet the Buddhist concept of accruing merit through spinning the wheel diverges markedly from Christian notions of prayer. Consequently, this translation sacrifices conceptual precision to ensure immediate comprehension by the target audience.

5. Mandala

“Tancheng” refers to the cosmic diagram central to Zangzu Buddhist iconography. The English version adopts the Sanskrit loanword “mandala” [8], foregoing a literal rendering such as “altar city.” This deliberate choice merits attention: in anglophone Buddhist scholarship, “mandala” is a well-established academic term. The translators’ selection reflects their adeptness in aligning with the terminological conventions of the target language’s specialist discourse.

3. Constraints Imposed by Xizang Cultural Characteristics on Translation

The English translations of the aforementioned culturally loaded terms do not arise from arbitrary choices but are profoundly influenced by the intrinsic characteristics of Xizang culture. These features constitute the fundamental context within which the translation process unfolds.

Firstly, there exists a systemic absence of cultural schemata. Research in cognitive translation studies reveals that the difficulty in translating Xizang cultural terms originates from

a “cultural schema deficiency”, wherein the target-language readers lack the requisite background frameworks to comprehend these concepts [2]. For instance, the challenge in rendering “Tusi” lies not in the absence of an equivalent English term but rather in the nonexistence of a corresponding institutional schema within the target culture. Consequently, translators must resort to either functional approximations such as “Chief”, which results in cultural attenuation, or coin neologisms like “Tusi”, thereby imposing additional cognitive load on the reader. As Wang Dongfeng insightfully posits, cultural deficiency necessitates appropriate compensatory translation strategies [9].

Secondly, there is an inherent incommensurability of religious concepts. The conceptual framework of Zangzu Buddhism fundamentally diverges from that of the secular Christian-influenced English worldview. Terms like “Weisang” are not mere equivalents of “burning incense”, nor is the “prayer wheel” an ordinary devotional object. When translators employ Christian terminologies to represent Buddhist concepts, they effectively superimpose one religious experiential framework upon another—a predicament that no interfaith translation can fully reconcile.

Thirdly, the embodied nature of material culture poses unique challenges. Terms such as “zanba” and “Guozhuang” denote not only tangible objects but also embody entire ways of life. While transliteration preserves their cultural identity, it simultaneously relegates them to the realm of “exotic curiosities”. The readers may recognize “zanba” as a Zangzu foodstuff but remains unable to envisage its flavor, texture, or mode of consumption.

Fourthly, the untranslatability of oral traditions emerges as a salient issue. The translation of the Kangding Love Song lyrics exposes a deeper problem: Khams-pa literature is richly interwoven with folk songs, proverbs, and epic excerpts, which represent the oral tradition’s written crystallization. The reduplication “liuliu” functions not solely as an adjective but as a marker of specific oral rhythmicity. Its omission effectively effaces the oral texture intrinsic to the original text.

4. Characteristics of Translator Behavior under the Collaborative Translation Model

The English translations of Khams-pa and The

Secluded Face were completed through a collaborative model involving both foreign and native translators: Khams-pa was co-translated by Ruth Graham and Dong Rui, while The Secluded Face was jointly rendered by Andrew Stevenson and Dong Rui. This cooperative paradigm has shaped distinctive behavioral traits among the translators.

Firstly, the internalization of functional division. Within this collaborative framework, a clear demarcation of roles emerges: native translators undertake the comprehension of the source text and cultural interpretation, whereas foreign translators assume primary responsibility for target language expression and stylistic refinement. This division mitigates issues such as the “Chinglish” tendencies often exhibited by native non-fluent writers and equally circumvents the misinterpretations of cultural nuances sometimes made by foreign translators. The resultant fluent and idiomatic English of Khams-pa attests to the efficacy of this functional partition.

Secondly, the predominance of domestication strategies. Both translations exhibit a pronounced inclination toward domestication: “tǔsī” is rendered as “Chieftain” rather than retaining “Tusi”, “wēi sāng” becomes “burn incense” rather than “wei sang”, and “zhuàn jīng tǒng” is translated as “prayer wheel” instead of “sutra wheel”. This preference is intrinsically linked to the collaborative model wherein foreign translators—embodying the target audience—naturally gravitate toward expressions that read as native English rather than overt translations. Within the power dynamics of collaboration, the foreign translator’s linguistic intuition often asserts primacy. Venuti has defined this phenomenon as translator “invisibility” [10]; in the context of Khams-pa literature’s English rendition, such invisibility manifests as the accommodation of Xizang cultural idiosyncrasies to Anglophone linguistic conventions.

Thirdly, the deliberate employment of “deep translation”. The collaborative translators do not exclusively favor domestication; for culturally pivotal concepts such as “Guozhuang” and “Wind Horse”, they adopt strategies of transliteration with annotation or literal translation supplemented by explanatory notes. This “deep translation” creates textual and paratextual spaces for cultural elucidation, evidencing the translators’ conscious intent to

disseminate Xizang culture. However, this cultural conscientiousness predominantly targets key lexical items, whereas more commonplace cultural terms tend toward simplification.

Fourthly, the ethical tension inherent in translation. A profound issue within the collaborative model pertains to the ethical tensions between “readability” and “faithfulness.” When these imperatives conflict, which duty should the translator prioritize? The scholarly controversy ignited by Howard Goldblatt’s “extensive cuts and modifications” in translating Mo Yan’s works [11] highlights the dilemma. The omissions observable in the Khams-pa translations suggest that the collaborative translators’ shared commitment to domestication may blur the boundary between translation and adaptation.

5. Implications for the Foreign-Language Translation of the Khams-pa Writers

Drawing upon the foregoing analysis, several recommendations emerge for the English translation of works by the Khams-pa writers:

Firstly, the compilation of a standardized glossary for Khams-pa cultural terms would be beneficial. Currently, inconsistent translations of the same concepts—such as “Lián Huā Shēng Dà Shī” (Guru Rinpoche)—hinder the cohesive construction of cultural imagery. Collaborative efforts within the translation community to establish standard English equivalents for key Khams-pa cultural terminology could furnish translators with a reliable reference tool.

Secondly, a balanced approach between domestication and foreignization should be pursued. Excessive domestication risks eroding cultural specificity, whereas unmitigated foreignization may impede effective dissemination. A tiered translation strategy might be adopted: core cultural concepts (e.g., “Guozhuang”, “Wind Horse”) could be rendered via transliteration accompanied by annotation to preserve cultural identity; general cultural items (such as “zanba”) may be transliterated without ancillary explanation; functional cultural terms (like “Weisang”) could be approached through a compromise of functional equivalence supplemented by brief notes.

Thirdly, the complementary advantages inherent in the collaborative translation model warrant fuller utilization. This model ought not to be construed as foreign translators exercising unilateral dominance. A more equitable power

dynamic is advisable, whereby native translators possess the agency to challenge overly domesticated translations, while foreign collaborators demonstrate sensitivity to the expressive needs of cultural differentiation. The ideal collaboration would manifest as a bilateral dialogue rather than unilateral acquiescence.

Lastly, greater attention ought to be devoted to reception studies of translated Khams-pa literature. The current lack of systematic investigation into the overseas reception of these English translations leaves a gap in understanding target readers' responses. Empirical methods such as reader surveys and citation analyses should be employed to garner feedback, thus providing data-driven guidance for future translation endeavors.

6. Conclusion

The English translations of Khams-pa and *The Secluded Face* represent a significant endeavor in bringing Khams-pa literature to the global stage. Within the collaborative translation paradigm, the complementary division of labor between native and foreign translators has elevated the linguistic quality of the translations. Nevertheless, the predominance of domestication strategies has engendered cultural attrition and selective omissions. The challenges in translating Zangzu culturally loaded terms transcend mere linguistic barriers, encompassing the deeper complexities of cultural schemas, religious concepts, and oral traditions. The foreign-language translation of the Khams-pa writers must navigate a delicate equilibrium between "going out" and "going in"—striving not only for accessibility to the target readership but also for the preservation of Khams-pa culture's distinctive identity. Achieving this balance necessitates sustained collaboration among translators, publishers, and scholars alike.

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