

Cultural Transmission through Translation: Strategies for Culture-specific Items in Liu Sanjie Mountain Folk Songs

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of global cross-cultural communication, the transmission of Guangxi's multi-ethnic culture—epitomized by the intangible heritage of Liu Sanjie mountain folk songs—faces critical challenges in preserving its unique cultural semantics during translation. This study examines English translation strategies for culture-specific items (CSIs) in Liu Sanjie mountain folk songs, using Huang Shaozheng's translation to establish a parrel corpus. Applying Aixelá's framework and functional equivalence theory, a mixed-method analysis (quantitative data from 160 CSIs + qualitative case studies) reveals a strong preference for cultural substitution strategies (66.25%) over cultural conservation (33.75%). Absolute universalization (34.38%) emerged as the dominant technique, prioritizing target-reader accessibility, while linguistic translation (21.88%) was the primary conservation method. Findings indicate that while substitution enhances readability for global audiences, it risks diluting Zhuang ethnocultural specificity. The study concludes that effective CSI translation requires strategic balance between cultural fidelity and communicative clarity, proposing intratextual gloss as a mitigating tool. This offers practical insights for translating intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords

Cross-cultural communication; Liu Sanjie mountain folk songs; Culture-specific items; Cultural conservation; Cultural substitution

1. Introduction

In an era marked by deep global interconnectedness, the exchange of cultural narratives plays a vital role in fostering mutual understanding among diverse civilizations. The transmission of Guangxi's rich multi-ethnic heritage—particularly through the intangible cultural legacy of Liu Sanjie's mountain folk songs—highlights both the challenges and opportunities inherent in cultural translation. These songs are far more than musical compositions; they encapsulate the emotional landscapes, historical memories, and philosophical worldviews of the Zhuang people, serving as powerful vehicles of cultural expression. As these ballads traverse linguistic boundaries, preserving their unique cultural semantics becomes a central concern (Venuti, 1995). Effective translations not only bridge language barriers but also invite global audiences to engage with the values and traditions embedded in the songs. However, the density of local dialects, cultural references, and historical contexts presents significant challenges for translators. Understanding the strategies used in translating culture-specific items (CSIs) within these folk songs is thus essential to enhancing both their artistic integrity and communicative impact.

The book *Liu Sanjie — Her Free and Undying Mountain Songs*, compiled and translated by Huang Shaozheng (2021), systematically categorizes and translates Liu Sanjie’s mountain songs, including adaptations from musical dramas and opera scripts. This comprehensive compilation makes it an ideal subject for translation research. The volume includes the full script of the musical *Liu Sanjie* and nearly one hundred widely circulated mountain songs, all rich in regional and ethnic characteristics. Notably, these songs feature a high density of culture-specific items—such as personal names, place names, proverbs, allusions, and ethnic expressions—that not only enhance their aesthetic appeal but also convey deep cultural meanings and emotional resonance.

For instance, personal names like Liu Sanjie (刘三姐), Mo Laoye (莫老爷), and Liu’er (刘二) reflect narrative roles, character traits, and traditional naming conventions for heroes and antagonists. Place names such as Yufeng Mountain (鱼峰山) and Xiaolongtan (小龙潭), grounded in Guangxi natural geography and cultural heritage, evoke vivid images of local customs. Proverbs and allusions like “When chives bloom, they share one heart (韭菜开花一条心)” and “To shoot a rider, first shoot his horse; to capture bandits, first seize their leader (射人先射马, 擒贼先擒王)” enhance memorability through rhythmic vernacular expressions. Ethnic-specific terms—including those associated with the Zhuang song duel tradition such as “carnival (歌圩),” “vie (对山歌),” dialectal expressions like “armies of pests (蚂拐),” and agricultural references such as “sowing (下谷种)” and “reaping (谷子黄)” —underscore the cultural richness and linguistic diversity of the region.

Yet, these culture-specific elements pose considerable challenges for both translation and cross-cultural performance. Rooted in localized socio-cultural contexts, many terms may be obscure even to Chinese readers unfamiliar with Zhuang traditions, let alone to international audiences. Translators must therefore navigate a delicate balance between cultural preservation and substitution—a process requiring not only linguistic fluency but also cultural insight and communicative agility. This balancing act holds significant theoretical and practical implications for the global dissemination of intangible cultural heritage.

This study investigates the English translation strategies employed for CSIs in Liu Sanjie’s mountain folk songs, adopting a mixed-method approach to evaluate the translation tendencies of Huang Shaozheng. Through the lens of established translation theories, this research aims to elucidate how cultural fidelity and reader accessibility are negotiated, offering deeper insights into the broader practice of translating intangible cultural heritage across linguistic and cultural divides.

2. Aixelá’s Translation Strategies for Culture-specific Items

Spanish scholar Javier Franco Aixelá (1997) proposed a systematic framework of translation strategies for culture-specific items (CSIs), offering valuable theoretical guidance and practical insights for translators. These strategies are broadly categorized into two types: cultural conservation strategies and cultural substitution strategies.

2.1 Cultural Conservation Strategies

Table 1. Cultural Conservation Strategies in CSI Translation

Strategy	Definition
Repetition	The translator retains the original reference as much as possible, typically used for proper nouns like place names (e.g., Seattle → Seattle).
Orthographic Adaptation	Includes transcription and transliteration, particularly when the original uses a different writing system (e.g., Kemidov in Spanish → Kenidof in English).
Linguistic (non-cultural) Translation	A denotatively close reference is chosen, enhancing clarity while remaining anchored in the source culture (e.g., translating units of measurement or currency).
Extratextual Gloss	Explanatory information is provided in the form of footnotes, endnotes, glossaries, or bracketed commentary.
Intratextual Gloss	The explanation is integrated seamlessly into the main text to avoid disrupting the reading flow.

Cultural conservation strategies aim to preserve the original cultural content as faithfully as possible. Among these, repetition involves retaining the source language term without modification, particularly suitable for CSIs with clear

referential meanings, such as place names. Orthographic adaptation (or transliteration) adjusts the source term's spelling or phonetic form to align with the conventions of the target language, especially when different writing systems are involved. Linguistic (non-cultural) translation entails selecting a denotatively equivalent term that fits within the source culture while improving comprehension for the target audience. Intratextual gloss, where explanations are integrated into the main body of the text, and extratextual gloss, which includes annotations such as footnotes, endnotes, or glossaries, are both used to clarify the cultural meaning without sacrificing readability.

2.2 Cultural Substitution Strategies

Cultural substitution strategies prioritize target audience accessibility by modifying or replacing culture-specific references. Synonymy involves using synonymous or analogous expressions to avoid repetition and maintain stylistic variety. Limited universalization replaces obscure CSIs with more familiar references from the source culture that are more accessible to the target readers. Absolute universalization goes a step further by replacing CSIs with neutral, culture-free terms, thereby eliminating foreignness for easier comprehension. Naturalization adapts the CSI into a form more familiar to the target culture, aligning it with local norms and expectations. Deletion is occasionally employed to remove CSIs deemed too obscure or distracting, while autonomous creation introduces invented or imaginative cultural references not present in the source text, often to enhance appeal or narrative coherence.

Table 2. Cultural Substitution Strategies in CSI Translation

Strategy	Definition
Synonymy	The translator resorts to some kind of synonym or parallel reference to avoid repeating the CSI.
Limited Universalization	The translator replaces the CSI with another, more common item from the same source culture that is more familiar to target readers (e.g., an American football → a rugby ball).
Absolute Universalization	A completely neutral, non-culture-specific expression is used to avoid any foreign connotations (e.g., Chesterfield → sofa).
Naturalization	The CSI is adapted into a form that fits the cultural expectations and intertextual norms of the target language.
Deletion	The CSI is omitted from the translation to improve fluency or avoid confusion.
Autonomous Creation	A new cultural element is creatively introduced to add interest or compensate for cultural loss in the translation.

3. Descriptive Analysis of Translation Strategies for Culture - specific Items in *Liu Sanjie - her Free and Undying Mountain Songs*

Table 3. Statistics of Translation Strategies for CSIs in Liu Sanjie - Her Free and Undying Mountain Songs

Translation Strategy	Cultural Conservation		Cultural Substitution		
	Number of CSIs	Percentage	Translation Strategy	Number of CSIs	Percentage
Transliteration	4	2.50%	Synonymy	6	3.75%
Linguistic (non-cultural) Translation	35	21.88%	Limited Universalization	17	10.63%
Transliteration plus Linguistic (non-cultural) Translation	10	6.25%	Absolute Universalization	55	34.38%
Intratextual Gloss	5	3.12%	Naturalization	11	6.87%
			Deletion	8	5.00%
			Attenuation	9	5.62%
In Total	54	33.75%	In Total	106	66.25%

This section integrates statistical data and case analysis to examine the translator's approach to culture-specific items.

A total of 160 such items and their English translations were selected from *Liu Sanjie: Her Free and Undying Mountain Songs*. Drawing on Aixelá's classification of culture-specific items (CSIs), the analysis investigates whether the translator tends toward cultural preservation or cultural substitution, and identifies the frequency of each translation method employed. Furthermore, case studies illustrate how the translator interprets the referential and cultural meanings of CSIs, evaluates the target audience's cultural competence, and chooses suitable translation strategies and techniques.

The data in Table 3 shows that out of the 160 culture-specific items translated, Huang Shaozheng employed 54 instances of cultural conservation strategies and 106 instances of cultural substitution strategies. The proportion of cultural conservation strategies is 33.75%, which is lower than the 66.25% for cultural substitution strategies, indicating a preference for cultural substitution when translating culture-specific items. Among the specific strategies, absolute universalization (34.38%) is the most commonly used, followed by linguistic translation (21.88%), while transliteration (2.50%) is the least used.

In terms of cultural conservation strategies, Huang primarily uses linguistic translation to convey the source language meaning of the mountain songs. Transliteration and transliteration plus linguistic translation were used 14 times, mainly for translating proper names, places, and expressions that are widely accepted in English. When transliteration and linguistic translation do not sufficiently explain certain culture-specific items, he employs intratextual gloss for clarification.

For cultural substitution strategies, when a culture-specific item may be difficult for English audiences to understand or accept, Huang tends to use absolute universalization for translation. For culture-specific items that appear repeatedly in the source text, he employed synonymy to avoid redundancy and enrich the expression in the target language. When he deems certain semantic redundancies in the source culture unnecessary to emphasize repeatedly, he opts for deletion. Additionally, when the emotional connotations of certain culture-specific items are too strong or extreme, he uses attenuation for a more neutral and objective translation.

4. Case Analysis of Translation Strategies for Culture-Specific Items in Liusanjie's Mountain Songs: A Functional Equivalence Approach

Drawing upon Nida's theory of functional equivalence, this section examines the translation of culture-specific items (CSIs) in Liusanjie's Mountain Songs, focusing on two overarching strategies: cultural conservation and cultural substitution. Each strategy will be analyzed in terms of its specific techniques, applied cases, and effectiveness in achieving functional equivalence between source and target texts.

4.1 Cultural Conservation Strategies

To preserve the richness and distinctiveness of the source culture, the translator adopts various cultural conservation techniques. These strategies emphasize the retention of linguistic and cultural markers that shape the unique identity of Liusanjie's songs.

(1) Transliteration

Huang (2021) frequently employs transliteration for proper names lacking specific cultural connotations, such as “刘二 (Liu'er)”, “兰芬 (Lanfen)”, and “小牛 (Xiaoniu)”. Transliteration of names, places, and culturally embedded terms maintains the phonological features of the original while fostering the cultural ambiance of the text (Lai et al., 2025). In *Liu Sanjie – Her Free and Undying Mountain Songs*, transliteration is concise and melodic, preserving both the simplicity and warmth of the original and the folk flavor embedded in regional identities.

(2) Linguistic (non-cultural) Translation

This approach, akin to literal translation, involves selecting equivalent lexical items in the target language after thoroughly interpreting the cultural context. It allows readers to grasp the cultural implications embedded in the original.

Example 1

SL: 这才离乡弃土来投亲。

TL: Till we have to flee to seek refuge and look for kinsmen here.

Here, “投亲” is rendered as “look for kinsmen”, which effectively conveys the original notion of seeking familial refuge. The translation achieves functional equivalence by accurately transmitting both semantic and emotional content.

Example 2

SL: 撕下莫家鬼脸壳，封山原是为霸山。

TL: Off with Mo's devilish mask. You seal it simply to rob us of it.

The term “鬼脸壳” is rendered as “devilish mask”, preserving its emotive power and connotative meaning. “Devilish” introduces conflict and villainy, echoing the negative connotation of the source term, and thus ensures reader engagement while maintaining cultural authenticity.

(3) Transliteration plus Linguistic (non-cultural) Translation

For certain character names, the translator blends transliteration with explanatory translation—for example, “李秀才 (Scholar Li)”, “王媒婆 (matchmaker Mme. Wang)”, “莫老爷 (Lord Mo)”, and “韦老奶 (Grandma Wei)”. This method clarifies social identity while maintaining the cultural specificity of the characters, helping readers understand interpersonal dynamics and social roles within the narrative context.

(4) Intratextual Gloss

Intratextual glosses clarify the implicit elements in the source text, facilitating accurate understanding for the target audience and eliminating potential confusion. Intratextual gloss also help avoid misunderstandings arising from cultural differences while ensuring the integrity of the information conveyed, without diminishing the audience's interest.

Example 3

SL: 铁算盘，一斗借来五斗还。

TL: A shrewd abacus, heartless indeed! Woe to any debtor of this loan shark!

Translating “铁算盘” as “A shrewd abacus, heartless indeed!” not only retains the literal meaning of the source text but also conveys the emotional undertones of cunning and ruthlessness associated with the character. The phrase “heartless indeed” emphasizes the harshness of the loan shark's practices, enhancing the reader's understanding of the stakes involved. The translation effectively captures the essence of the source text, allowing readers to feel the tension and moral implications present in the source text, thus achieving functional equivalence.

Example 4

SL: 绣球当捡你不捡，捡得忧来捡得愁！

TL: Take this silk ball, token of my love. Promise me today a union of two hearts. Or you will regret your prime lost forever.

The strategy of employing intratextual gloss in translating “绣球” as “silk ball, token of my love” enriches the target text by providing both a literal and cultural context. The term “silk ball” conveys the material aspect, while “token of my love” captures the emotional significance, allowing the target audience to grasp the dual meanings embedded in the source text. It achieves functional equivalence in expressing both literal and cultural meaning.

4.2 Cultural Substitution Strategies

In contrast, cultural substitution strategies adapt culture-specific expressions to target language norms and reader expectations. These strategies enhance readability and emotional resonance by bridging cultural gaps through substitution, generalization, or reinterpretation.

(1) Synonymy

For recurrent culture-specific items in mountain songs, the synonymy substitution strategy proves effective in mitigating textual monotony while enhancing expressive richness through lexical variation.

Example 5

SL-a:都要在今晚歌圩上会刘三姐.....

TL-a: ...Looks like a carnival is around the corner tonight.

SL-b: 二哥，今晚歌圩上有成千上万外乡来的人。

TL-b: Liu'er, this evening thousands of folk near and far are congregating on the fixed location.

In Liu Sanjie - Her Free and Undying Mountain Songs, “歌圩” refers to the singing, dancing, and duet activities held by people during specific festivals. In the translation, Huang Shaozheng first translated it as “carnival”, highlighting the lively and joyful nature of the event. He then translated it as “the fixed location”, indicating that “歌圩” has become integrated into people's daily lives, allowing the audience to sense the atmosphere surrounding it.

In addition, there are also other culture-specific items employed the strategy of synonymy substitution in translation, such as “财主”. This term refers to a wealthy landlord or rich person. Huang Shaozheng translated it accordingly as “the rich”, “the local tyrant”, “the wicked”, and “the devilish lord”, with each term adding emotional depth and

highlighting people's disdain for the wealthy figure. This strategy brings the character of “财主” to life as a vivid antagonist.

(2) Limited Universalization

When a culture-specific item in the source language lacks a corresponding term in the target language, and its meaning is difficult for the target language readers to understand, the translator may choose limited universalization, substituting it with a more common or easily understood vocabulary.

Example 6

SL: 小牛哥！听说今天来和三姐对歌的，是莫家特地从外地请来的秀才！

TL: Xiaoniu, I've heard that the Mo family has hired three pundits to vie with Third Sister today.

“秀才”和“对歌” do not have corresponding cultural terms in English-speaking countries. “秀才” refers to a title in China's ancient imperial examination system, designating scholars who passed the provincial examination, typically indicating individuals with a certain level of cultural knowledge and academic achievement. English audiences unfamiliar with the examination system may find this confusing. Huang Shaozheng used limited universalization to translate “秀才” as “pundits”, a term that broadly refers to educated individuals, ensuring the translation's understandability and readability. This achieves functional equivalence in meaning but loses some cultural connotation.

“对歌”, on the other hand, is a traditional singing activity in Chinese folklore, usually conducted during festivals or gatherings. Participants are divided into two teams or pairs, engaging in improvised singing for interaction and competition. Huang Shaozheng translated it as “vie”, ensuring the translation's clarity and readability while highlighting the tense atmosphere present in the source language.

(3) Absolute Universalization

Absolute universalization focuses on conveying the theme and emotion, without being constrained by the literal meaning.

Example 7

SL: 三寸舌头一嘴油，男婚女嫁把我求。

TL: A matchmaker, I have glib lip. My craft becomes my purse with recommendations more artistic than honest. (P49)

The phrase “三寸舌头” in the source language metaphorically suggests someone who is eloquent and persuasive, while “一嘴油” implies slickness and cunning. Together, they create a negative image of “using clever words to conceal motives”. The translator breaks this down into a combination of “glib lip” and “matchmaker”, preserving the core characteristic of being articulate while using “matchmaker”, a role in Western culture that also embodies attributes of persuasion and mediation. This achieves precise semantic projection, ensuring functional equivalence in both meaning and culture, allowing target language readers to understand the negative connotation without relying on annotations.

Example 8

SL: 问你几时下谷种？问你几时谷子黄？

TL: Here's the ABC for a would-be scholar: When are the proper times for reaping and sowing?

“下谷种” specifically refers to the sowing stage in rice cultivation, while “谷子黄” marks the harvesting point, both closely tied to the rice planting cycle. The terms “sowing” and “reaping”, as universal agricultural symbols, can apply to crops like wheat and corn, carrying a lighter cultural load. The translator employs absolute universalization, elevating the source phrase from Chinese rice cultivation experience to the commonality of human agricultural civilization, thereby expanding cultural compatibility. This approach achieves functional equivalence in terms of emotional resonance.

(4) Naturalization

Naturalization refers to the use of more commonly used culture-specific terms in the target language to interpret the source language, enhancing the readability of the translation and making the emotional expression more relatable to the target language audience.

Example 9

SL: 老子拿你一只野兔来下酒，是赏你的脸。

TL: Your game comes in handy. I will sort of feast with wine and I'm doing you an honor.

The source phrase “赏你的脸” conveys the speaker's underlying implication of “humbling oneself”. The translation “doing you an honor” activates the stereotype of “nobility bestowing favor” in English culture. Additionally,

there exists the expression “do me a favor” in English, and “doing you an honor” retains its structure. By leveraging the semantic connection between “honor” and “favor”, it achieves core semantic transmission of the “favoring action”, while the noun substitution facilitates semantic shift (Shu, 2025), resulting in semantic variation under a legitimate guise.

Example 10

SL: 三月秧苗岭顶栽，栽下秧苗望雨来。

TL: March is the season of transplanting rice shoots onto terraced paddies. That being done, let's cross our fingers for rain. (P188)

Translating “望雨来” as “cross our fingers for rain” allows the emotion of “praying for rain” from Chinese agricultural culture to be transformed into the body language symbol of “crossed fingers” in English culture, thus achieving functional equivalence. According to the theory of functional equivalence, “the response of the target language readers to the translation should be substantially the same as the response of the source language readers to the source text” (Nida, 1964). The source phrase conveys the farmers' awe and dependence on natural rhythms, while the target phrase activates the collective memory of “praying for good luck” in English culture, enabling target language readers to empathize with the source phrase's anxiety and hope without relying on annotations.

(5) Deletion

For culture-specific items in the source language that exhibit meaning repetition and information redundancy, Huang Shaozheng employs the deletion strategy, omitting certain words, phrases, or sentences from the source language. For example, he simplified “利加利，利滚利” to “the loan with compound interest”, “天连水来水连天” to “the waters spread to meet the sky”, and “竹篮打水一场空” to “as drawing in water with a leaking basket”, effectively avoiding repetition and verbosity in the translation, making it more aligned with English expression rules. However, excessive deletion can weaken the cultural connotations of the source language. For instance, Huang translated “太师椅” as “chair”, which loses the symbol of power and status, as the term “chair” fails to convey its prestigious and auspicious cultural significance.

(6) Attenuation

The attenuation strategy reduces or eliminates strong emotions, cultural features, or specific expressions in the source language to achieve a more balanced or neutral effect. Huang Shaozheng translated “狗屁不通臭上天” as “rot like this stinks”, softening the emotional depiction and making the emotional tone of the verse more subdued. He translated “饭桶秀才死读书” as “education proves your undoing”, removing potentially misleading or uncomfortable emotional expressions, which makes the translation more universal.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzes the translation strategies of culture-specific items in *Liu Sanjie - Her Free and Undying Mountain Songs* by a combination of data statistics and case analysis. It explores the tendencies of translator Huang Shaozheng between cultural conservation and cultural substitution. The results indicate that while Huang employs cultural conservation strategies to some extent (33.75%), he tends to favor cultural substitution strategies (66.25%), with absolute universalization (34.38%) being particularly prominent.

This tendency differs slightly from other scholars' research. For example, when handling culture-specific items in *Brothers*, translators Luo Peng and Zhou Chengyin strive to maintain a balance between cultural conservation and substitution strategies but overall lean slightly towards preserving the characteristics and connotations of Chinese culture (Wang & Quan, 2017). Additionally, translators Ying Ruocheng and Howard primarily adopt cultural conservation strategies in translating culture-specific items in *Teahouse* to convey the Chinese cultural connotations of the work as accurately as possible to English readers (Wang, 2019).

In the translation of Liu Sanjie mountain songs, Huang more frequently employed cultural replacement strategies, likely due to significant differences between the cultural backgrounds of the target language readers and the source culture. By replacing uniquely Chinese cultural elements with more universal expressions, readability and relatability can be enhanced. Moreover, cultural substitution strategies help convey the rhythm and emotions of the songs while aligning better with the aesthetic preferences of target language readers, thus attracting more overseas audiences and readers, further enhancing the artistic value of the work.

From this study, the following insights can be summarized. In the translation practice of lyrical texts, transliteration and linguistic translation, as important components of cultural preservation strategies, effectively retain the cultural

characteristics of the source language. Meanwhile, employing synonymy and absolute universalization as cultural substitution strategies can avoid linguistic monotony and enhance text readability and expressiveness. Furthermore, the timely use of intratextual gloss acts as a bridge, overcoming cultural barriers and clearly conveying the deeper cultural connotations of the source text to the target readers.

However, the use of cultural substitution strategies may lead to the dilution or loss of certain cultural features, especially when translating complex emotions and specific cultural concepts, as the poetic rhythm of Chinese can be challenging to preserve in English translations (Deng, 2024). Therefore, translators must weigh the pros and cons of cultural conservation and cultural substitution during the translation process, striving to remain faithful to the original emotional expression while ensuring that the translation is easily understood by target readers.

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