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# Chinese Non-Equivalent Words from the Old Tea House of *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming in Reminiscence* and Their Ways of Translation into English

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## KEYWORDS

## ABSTRACT

*Chinese non-equivalent words;*  
*Ways of translation;*  
*English translation;*  
*Old tea house of old tales and photos of kunming in reminiscence;*

This article puts concentration on the Chinese non-equivalent words in the Old Tea House part from the book *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming in Reminiscence* and the methods adopted in translating these non-equivalent words into English. By using the theoretical analysis, induction and deduction, this article displays many tables to give a classification of the non-equivalent words and the translation strategies, meanwhile, with the statistic ways, the article specifically shows the proportions of the non-equivalent words and the translation methods, so as to spread Chinese culture abroad and smoothly carry on cross cultural communication.

## INTRODUCTION

The notion of equivalence is the conceptual basis of translation and, to quote Catford, “the central problem of translation practice is that of finding TL (target language) equivalents. A central task of translation theory is therefore that of defining the nature and conditions of translation equivalence [1].” Although in different kinds of culture and literature exist different non-equivalent words, Chinese expert Feng Yulv suggested that due attention must be given to the analysis and comparison of the cultural connotations of words in four areas: non-equivalence, conceptual grouping, cultural background and association-derivation [2]. From above-mentioned, it shows that translation of non-equivalent words is meaningful to know different kinds of culture.

Each language is the conveyor of a certain culture. Since words are the smallest unit of a language, they are closely related to the culture. Therefore, the meaning of non-equivalent words varies from person to person who lives in different culture. This article puts concentration on the Chinese non-equivalent words in the Old Tea House part from the book *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming in*

*Reminiscence* and their strategies adopted into English translation. As a result, this article tries to break through the traditional translating methods and apply the systematic translation theory to the translation practice. It discusses the translation from a new angle, which not only provides people with a fresh perspective to look at the issue of translation, but also, more importantly, makes up for the existing translation theories and practice of how to translate the non-equivalent words.

By using the theoretical analysis, induction and deduction, this article displays a concrete analysis about the non-equivalent words from the Old Tea House part of the book *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming in Reminiscence* and their methods of translation into English. At the same time, the article cites many examples from the above-mentioned book to showcase the author’s viewpoints. In the article, the author displays many tables to give a classification of the non-equivalent words and the translation strategies, meanwhile, with the statistic ways, the article specifically shows the proportions of the non-equivalent words and the translation methods, so as to spread Chinese

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culture abroad and smoothly carry on cross cultural communication.

## **1.The Related Research on Non-Equivalent Words Translation**

Generally, almost all translation scholars emphasize the role of equivalence in the process or product of translation directly or indirectly. Therefore, it is in the center of the translation studies. It must be said that much ink has been devoted to the problem of non-equivalence in translation which shed light on many studies. As a consequence, the nature of non-equivalence, its strategies tackling non-equivalence at a new level, they will be clearly clarified in this article.

### **1.1.The Definition of Non-Equivalent Words**

Non-equivalent words are very special words in different culture from different countries. At the same time, some experts definite them as culture-loaded words or culturally traditional words, however, the article shows the definition of non-equivalent words from various scholars' perspectives.

In Mona Baker's expressions, "the source-language word may express a concept which is totally unknown in the target culture. The concept in question may be abstract or concrete: it may relate to a religious belief, a social custom, or a type of food. Such concepts are often referred to as 'culture-specific' [3]." Louis B. Salomon, considers the non-equivalent words as "vocabulary blanks" and "semantic un-fact" and some other scholars define them as "key words (to society and culture)", "culturally bound or culture-specific, culturally conditioned words [4]."

Mr. Wang Huan, a distinguished scholar, thinks that, "every language has the so-called culture-bound terms which are closely related to the cultural background of those speaking that language, and which represent the concepts of those things produced from that peculiar culture. There are no equivalent words or expressions since such things do not exist in another culture [5]." Another Chinese scholar Mr. Hu Wenzhong, believes that, "Non-equivalent words load with specific national culture information and indicate deep national culture. They are the direct or indirect reflections of national culture at the structure of lexemes [6]."

Nevertheless, no matter how differently non-equivalent words are defined, they share the following three main

characteristics: (1). they are peculiar to one culture; (2). they are rich in cultural connotation or associative reflection; (3). it is difficult or impossible to find their equivalences in other culture. Therefore, only when enough attention is paid to their translation can the culture be transferred to other countries effectively.

### **1.2.The Related Theory on Non-Equivalent Words Translation in Western Countries**

In Western countries, non-equivalent words translation takes a popular position. The term "equivalence" in translation first appeared in J. R. Firth's writing (1957) when he stated that "the so-called translation equivalence between two languages are never really equivalent (Snell-Hornby, 1988) [7]."

Briefly, J. R. Firth, Nida, Catford, Baker, Newmark and Wilss, all of these theorists have endeavored to interpret the notion of equivalence, approached equivalence from different angles and perspectives and all have contributed much to this area of research. Particularly, Wilss states that "the concept of translation equivalence has been all essential issue not only in translation theory over the last 2000 years, but also in modern translation studies. Nevertheless or maybe as a result of prolonged reflection about translation equivalence — there is hardly any other concept in translation theory which has produced as many contradictory statements and has set off many attempts at an adequate, comprehensive definition as the concept of translation equivalence between source language text and target language text (Wilss, 2002) [8]." In his definition, "translation is a transfer process which aims at the transformation of a written source language text into an optimally equivalent target language text and which requires the syntactic, the semantic and the pragmatic understanding and analytical processing of the source language text (Wilss,1982) [9]."

### **1.3.The Popularity of Non-Equivalent Words Research in China**

Equivalence studies in China in the past times was not very popular, however, nowadays some scholars put their concentrations on the terms. At the end of the 19th century, Yan Fu, put forth the three principle of translation — faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance. Faithfulness means equivalence, mainly concerning the content.

Expressiveness refers to the relationship between the message and the receptors. Elegance relates to style. In a word, Yan Fu made great contributions to the development of translation of China. Afterwards, there is a great number of translators and translation theorist such as Lu Xun, Qu Qiubai and Ji Xianlin, etc. They also put forward a lot of translation theories similar to equivalence theory in the western countries. All of them have contributed to the development of equivalence theory.

#### **1.4.The Introduction on *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming in Reminiscence***

*Old Tales and Photos of Kunming in Reminiscences* was Published by Yunnan Fine Arts Publishing House, and it is a monumental six-volume cultural history series that stands as the most comprehensive visual and textual archive of Kunming’s urban heritage. Compiled over five years by Zhu Jingyu, a research fellow at Kunming Municipal Institute of Cultural History and distinguished local historian, this collection was first released in June 2021, with a revised edition following in July 2024.

Spanning 1,900 pages with over two million Chinese characters and 2,000 carefully curated historical photographs, the series comprises 1,260 short essays organized into six thematic volumes. Each volume explores a distinct dimension of old Kunming: Those Scenes (urban landscapes and architecture), Those Trades (commerce and industry), Those Local Customs (geography and feng shui traditions), Those Curiosities (extraordinary people and mysterious events), Those Folkways (customs and dialects), and Those City Walls (urban formation and evolution).

The series distinguishes itself through rigorous historical scholarship and unprecedented visual documentation. Drawing upon diverse sources including official histories, local gazetteers, archaeological records, folklore, and oral histories, Zhu Jingyu corrects longstanding historical misconceptions. Notable achievements include debunking the myth of Kunming’s “turtle-shaped” city walls through contextual evidence, and tracing the origins of the famous “Eighteen Oddities of Yunnan” to a Ming Dynasty text discovered in overseas archives, rectifying century-old textual errors.

A particularly valuable contribution is the inclusion of rare photographs by Auguste François, the French consul in Kunming during the late Qing Dynasty, whose copyright

was secured through substantial investment by the publisher. These images, alongside ancient and modern maps, many published for the first time, provide irreplaceable visual testimony to the city’s transformation.

The series employs a unique narrative structure: each self-contained essay of 1,000-2,000 characters presents a vivid micro-story, while collectively forming coherent chapters and volumes that interweave to create a multidimensional portrait of Kunming’s social history. This approach has earned the work praise for being “readable, viewable, understandable, usable, and enjoyable” — the “five excellences” celebrated by readers.

Beyond academic circles, the series has achieved remarkable public impact. Kunming Daily serialized over 100 installments under the title “Kunming’s Urban Pulse,” while the municipal government has utilized its materials for official cultural promotion. The collection received prominent placement at the National Reading Conference, and three volumes have been translated into English for international distribution, sharing Kunming’s stories with global audiences.

Zhu Jingyu, born in Kunming with Hunan ancestry, brings diverse life experience—from sent-down youth and factory worker to journalist and editor — to this magnum opus created in his seventies. His previous works on Yunnan’s cultural mysteries and the Ancient Tea Horse Road established his reputation; this series represents his definitive contribution to preserving Kunming’s historical memory.

More than a local history, *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming in Reminiscences* serves as an essential reference for understanding modern China’s frontier development, ethnic integration, and urban modernization. It transforms scattered archival fragments into an accessible, engaging narrative that honors the city’s complex past while illuminating its contemporary identity.

## **2.The Classification of Chinese Non-Equivalent Words from the Old Tea House Part of *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming in Reminiscences***

### **2.1.Non-equivalent Words on Idioms, Colloquial Phrases, Folk Adage and Vulgar Expressions**

Looking through the Chinese history, there are many phrases

and words were created in the process of the development of our society. In Chinese language, the four-word idioms play an outstanding role in the language systems; they are frequently used in the communications. Meanwhile, from *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming* in Reminiscences the author also used a large number of four-word idioms to depict some situations that are displayed in the following tables. While the article also picked up some widely used Chinese colloquial phrases, folk adages and not very rude vulgar expressions from the above-mentioned book like the followings.

No.	Chinese Non-Equivalent words	English Translation
1	弥久如故	a refreshing aroma
2	指手画脚	gesturing and drooling
3	蛊惑人心	deceiving people
4	“张家长、李家短”	“the daily life of every family around them”
5	捕风捉影	spreading uncertain news
6	“三只手”	“three hands” (thief)

**Table.1.**Non-Equivalent Words on Idioms, Colloquial Phrases, Folk Adages and Vulgar Expressions

### 2.2.Non-equivalent Words on Chinese Sayings, Proverbs, and Classical Allusions

Chinese sayings, proverbs and classical allusions are the magnificent treasure in Chinese culture treasury. It is the accumulation and sublimation of various experiences in human’s long-term livelihood and social practice. Particularly, the classical allusions are summarized from some preminent historical events by Chinese people in the ancient times or in the modern periods. Therefore, having a good command of using them helps people understand the thinking methods as well as the customs and habits of a nation. Part of these non-equivalent words are displayed in table 2.

No.	Chinese Non-Equivalent words	English Translation
1	不亦乐乎	Extremely enjoyable
2	善者则称诒不置, 恶者则贬斥有加	Those who are kind will praise these, and those who are evil will criticize and add more negative details.

3	而今人长大, 心事乱麻	When I grow up today, my mind is in turmoil.
4	更上一层楼	Strive for further improvement
5	如痴如醉, 不能自己	Intoxicated and unable to do it on one’s own
6	要知后事如何, 且听下回分解	You need to know what will happen next, and listen to the next chapter to break it down.

**Table.2.**Non-Equivalent Words on Chinese Sayings, Proverbs, and Classical Allusions

### 2.3.Non-equivalent Words on Addressing of People and Characters

In China, people prudently deal with the relationships with others, especially the addressing of people. In the relationship scale, Chinese obey the traditional address of people, such as, in Chinese culture, everyone should choose the appropriate address to call a person, because the inappropriate title or name will cause misunderstanding and even discrimination. Some of these non-equivalents words are showed in table 3.

No.	Chinese Non-Equivalent words	English Translation
1	阿娘	aunt
2	乡亲父老	fellow villagers
3	娇妻美妾	beautiful wife and concubine
4	大儒	a great Confucian scholar
5	江湖郎中	quacks
6	地下党员	an underground party member

**Table.3.**Non-Equivalent Words on Addressing of People and Characters

### 2.4.Non-equivalent Words on Chinese Historical Periods

China is an old country with a long history. In every dynasty, it has its own short and unique name about the era. Therefore, they are also the Chinese non-equivalent words which are selected from *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming* in Reminiscences and are put in the table below.

No	Chinese Non-Equivalent words	English Translation
1	晚清	the late Qing Dynasty

2	民国时期	the Republic of China Era
3	抗日战争时期	the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression
4	清乾隆年	the Qianlong reign of the Qing Dynasty
5	清光绪年间	the reign of Emperor Guangxu in the Qing Dynasty
6	明代	the Ming Dynasty

**Table.4.**Non-Equivalent Words on Chinese Historical Periods

### 2.5.Non-equivalent Words on Materials and Objects

There are various different kinds of materials and things exist in every country with different cultures, although they naturally came into being or are created by people, they are also the symbols of different cultures. The article drew attention to some special Chinese things which do not exist in Western countries from the composition as non-equivalent words to show the uniqueness in the following table.

No.	Chinese Non-Equivalent words	English Translation
1	乌龙茶	Oolong tea
2	长嘴铜壶	a long mouthed copper pot
3	八仙桌	Eight Immortals Tables
4	水烟筒	hookah pipes with Yunnan style
5	芙蓉糕	lotus cake
6	草鞋	straw sandals
7	文房四宝	the Four Treasures of Study
8	米线	rice noodles

**Table.5.**Non-Equivalent Words on Materials and Objects

### 2.6.Non-equivalent Words on Customs or Traditional Activities

Customs and traditional activities as the necessary parts of culture, they contribute a large share to human culture. Looking back to the historical development, each nation has had its own belief and formed its own special custom and traditional activities. In most of the Western countries, Christianity imposes great influences on the social culture; while in China, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism take a dominant position in the civilization. From these different

customs, people also use different words to depict them. The article selects some custom non-equivalent words on Chinese culture which the author describe some traditional aspects in *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming* in Reminiscences (see table 6).

No.	Chinese Non-Equivalent words	English Translation
1	“打围鼓”	“Weigu (playing drum)”
2	听花灯	listening to the Huadeng opera
3	评书	storytelling
4	搓麻将	playing mahjong
5	提笼斗雀	carrying a cage sparrow
6	看手相	the service of palmistry checking
7	斗蟋蟀	cricket fighting

**Table.6.**Non-Equivalent Words on Custom and Traditional Activities

### 2.7.Non-equivalent Words on Nature and Ecology

Putting the concentration on the nature and ecology, distinctive living surroundings lead to the fact that people hold different attitude toward nature. This kind of non-equivalent words are the reflections of the climate, and the characteristics of the natural environment of a certain language community. Thus, the non-equivalent words are related with nature and ecology serve as a unique group for people to do cultural communication. They are reflected in the table 7.

No.	Chinese Non-Equivalent words	English Translation
1	风花雪月	enjoying the leisure and beauty of life
2	绿意葱茏	lush
3	五湖四海	from all corners of the world
4	过河拆桥	cross the river and demolish the bridge (drop one’s benefactor as soon as his help is not required)
5	天经地义	a natural thing
6	风雨无阻	regardless of wind or rain

**Table.7.**Non-Equivalent Words on Nature and Ecology

## 2.8. Geographical non-equivalent Words

From the geographical perspective, every country locates in the different zones in the whole world, and they are famous for some places, such as cities, cultural relics, towns, rivers, lakes, roads and so on. In China, it really exists thousands of famous places, such as the cultural relics. These famous places are also as non-equivalent words distinguished from other countries, and parts of these non-equivalent words are showed in the table 8.

No.	Chinese Non-Equivalent words	English Translation
1.	昆明市	Kunming City (the capital of Yunnan province in China)
2.	广东	Guangdong
3.	四川	Sichuan
4.	滇越铁路	the Yunnan-Vietnam Railway
5.	巡津街	Xunjin Street
6.	翠湖	The Green Lake

Table 8. Geographical Non-Equivalent Words

## 2.9. Linguistic and Literary Non-Equivalent Words

With the eye of linguistics, this article chose some linguistic words that are created by Chinese nations. This article also shows some literary compositions and masterpieces of Chinese writers. They are also non-equivalent words which carry the essence of Chinese culture to the world (see table 9).

No.	Chinese Non-Equivalent words	English Translation
1	《本草纲目》	(Li Shizhen's) <i>Compendium of Materia Medica</i>
2	《云南掌故》	<i>Anecdotes of Yunnan</i>
3	《老昆明风情录》	<i>Record of Old Kunming Style</i>
4	《昆明市志》	<i>The Kunming City Chronicle</i>
5	《三国演义》	<i>The Romance of the Three Kingdoms</i>
6	《水浒传》	<i>Heroes of the Marshes</i>
7	《红楼梦》	<i>The Dream of Red Mansion</i>

Table 9. Linguistic and literary Non-Equivalent Words Non-Equivalent Words on Nature and Ecology

To sum up, in all above-mentioned Chinese non-equivalent

words, they not only represent the uniqueness and characteristics in the Old Tea House part from the book *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming in Reminiscence*, but also could be looked upon as the crystallization of Chinese language and culture. Therefore, it is necessary to translate them into English or other languages for people from all over the world to appreciate the Chinese literature and culture. Raised for translation, in the third part, this article will show the techniques adopted in translating the Chinese non-equivalent words into English.

## 3. Strategies Adopted to Translate the Chinese Non-Equivalent Words into English and Case Analysis in the Old Tea House Part of *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming in Reminiscences*

### 3.1. Strategies Adopted to Translate the Chinese Non-Equivalent Words into English

In this part, the article will give a detailed explanation of the strategies adopted in the non-equivalent words translation; meanwhile, it also selects many examples from the the Old Tea House Part of *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming in Reminiscences* to give analysis of how to translate the Chinese non-equivalent words into English. This paper gives a statistics about ten ways of translation. They are displayed in table 10.

No.	The names of the strategies of translation
1	Transcription
2	Transliteration
3	Calques or Half-calques
4	Word-by-word translation (Literal translation)
5	Free translation
6	Conversion
7	Implication
8	Omission or Reduction
9	Compensation
10	Explanatory

Table 10. Ten Ways of Translation

### 3.2. Case Analysis about the Non-Equivalent words and Their Ways of Translation into English in the Old Tea House Part of *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming in Reminiscences*

In A practical transcription is an inter-linguistic operation as

it deals with two languages: the sounds of the source language word are rendered by the letters of the target language. Through this way of translation, there are many non-equivalent words are translated in the Old Tea House part of *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming* in Reminiscences, such as 乌龙茶 “Oolong tea” is translated into English in this way.

The notion of transliteration is based on representing written characters of one language by the characters of another language. Transliteration and transcription often compete, so that sometimes it is difficult to state how to render a word (especially a personal or place name) in the other language. But transliteration is preferred to transcription in bibliographical citations found in publications, such as the non-equivalents 昆明 “Kunming” related to places can be translated in this way. And Calques, also called blueprint translation, are the translation of a word or a phrase by parts. Some linguists (V. Komissarov, for one) consider calques (blueprint) translation as mechanical copying [10]. Calque is translation by parts, they may take place half-calques in cases where half of the word is borrowed through transcription or transliteration and the other half is translated [11], the Chinese non-equivalent word about the places such as 巡津街 “Xunjing Street” is a prototype of this translation way.

Literal translation is sometimes called word-by-word translation referred to as formal, or grammar translation, though it is not the same [12]. In the Old Tea House part, this is one of the popular or frequent ways to translate the Chinese non-equivalent words. This article picks up some example and display in the example 1:

最让听众吊胃口的是,在听到最精彩的部分时,随着“啪”一声惊堂木响:“要知后事如何,且听下回分解。”(1a) The most tantalizing thing for the audience is when they hear the most exciting part, accompanied by a deafening “bang”: “You need to know what will happen next, and listen to the next chapter to break it down.”

Free translation is the translation method switches the source form and content in a loose way. This concept means adding extra elements of information or losing some essential ones [13]. This translation method can be used to translate the Chinese non-equivalent words in the example 2.

当然,交易双方知道其中必有差价,而这个差价理所当然归捐客所有,这是天经地义的事,只是他们不知道具体数额而已。(2a) Of course, both parties to the transaction know that there must be a price difference, and this price

difference naturally belongs to the brokers. This is a natural thing, but they do not know the specific amount.

Conversion is just like the transformation; translators will use some special expressions or sentence structures to change the meaning, the grammar of the source language, but it will not deviate from the primitive meaning [14].

茶铺里的“自娱自乐”多了,有些茶馆老板又更上一层楼,走“专业”路线扩展营业。(3a) There are more “self entertainment” activities in tea shops, and some tea house owners have striven for further improvement and taken a “professional” approach to expand their business.

Implication is a kind of technique that translators use something is inferred to translate the specific words or expressions, or maybe the translator wants switch the meaning that is not expressly stated but can be inferred [15]. This method is rarely used in the translations, but it always plays an important role in translating some euphemism, periphrases or some vulgar expressions.

学生的话题大多是时局、学习和娱乐;农民则更多的谈论“张家长、李家短。”(3a) Students mostly talk about the current situation, learning, and entertainment; farmers talk more about “the daily life of every family around them.”

Omission or reduction is giving up redundant and communicatively irrelevant words. The reduction is a must if a source language expresses the notion by a phrase and the target language compresses the idea in one word [16].

那是一个污浊而混乱的时代,学生生活又穷困得近乎潦倒,但是很多人却能自许清高,鄙视庸俗,并能保持绿意葱茏的幽默感,……。(5a) It was a polluted and chaotic era, where student life was almost impoverished and destitute. However, many people could consider themselves lofty, despise vulgarity, and maintain a lush sense of humor ....

Compensation is a deliberate introduction of some additional element in the target text to make up for the loss of a similar element in the source text. The main reason for this transformation is a vocabulary deficiency in the target language.

有看相人穿行其间,绕来绕去,嘴里念说着“送看手相不要钱”。(6a) A physiognomy walked through it, circling back and forth, muttering, “You don’t need to pay for the service of palmistry checking.”

Explanatory translation, which is the way rewording the meaning into another structure so that the receptor will have a better understanding of the phrase. Sometimes this transformation is named as explicit, defined as the technique

of making explicit in the target text information that is implicit in the source text [17].

作者是明代的大儒陈白沙。(7a) The author is Chen Baisha, a great Confucian scholar from the Ming Dynasty.

From the above-mentioned typical cases analysis and the classifications of non-equivalent words to know, the proportion of the translation methods used to translate the Chinese non-equivalent words into English in the Old Tea House part from the book *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming* in Reminiscence can be showed in the statistical figure 1. The most frequent used translation method is literal translation for the Chinese non-equivalent, and it takes nearly 50%. While the rest of the other nine ways of translation take an average proportion among them.

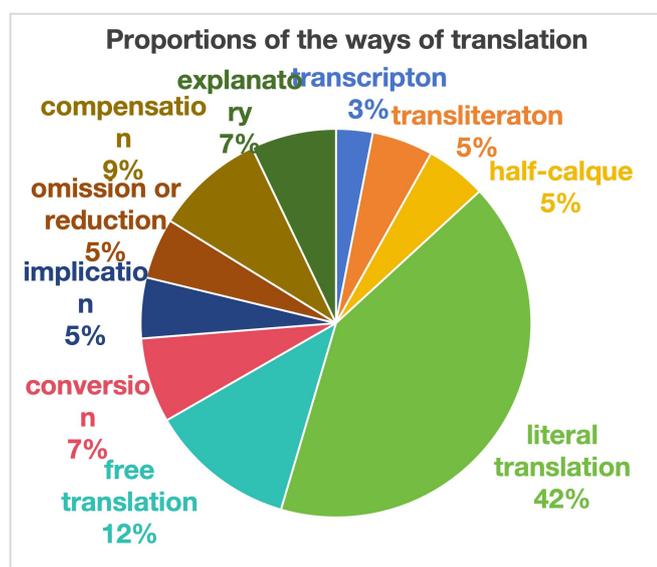


Fig.1. Proportions of the Ways of Translation

## Conclusion

This article makes a systematic study about the Chinese non-equivalent words from the Old Tea House part of *Old Tales and Photos of Kunming* in Reminiscences and the strategies adopted to translate them into English.

As a result, this paper also searched translation techniques such as half-calques, implication, omission or reduction, conversion, explanatory, compensation. Especially literal translation, transcription and transliteration, the former one is the main strategy while the latter two methods are the supplementary. The proper combination of all these translation methods can help keep the unique Chinese culture in the translated version and make the westerners better perceive its profound meaning.

The study apparently cannot offer detailed and

comprehensive comments on the strength and weaknesses of various strategies up to the expectation. The use of translation strategies applied in different context as well as more researches on Chinese and English case is critically needed. Generally speaking, non-equivalent words and their translation strategies in literary translation keep the presuppositional information and help preserve the traditional culture so that target-language readers can appreciate the foreign culture through the translation. Also they help increase the readability of the target-language text and ease the cultural conflict by altering the presuppositional information.

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