

Howard Goldblatt's English Translation of Culture-Specific Items in the Spatial Depiction of *Frog*

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Abstract—This study investigates the distribution of culture-specific items (CSIs) in the spatial depictions of Mo Yan's novel *Frog*, as well as translation strategies and specific methods employed by Howard Goldblatt in rendering these CSIs. Based on Nida's (2004) classification of culture and the linguistic characteristics of spatial depictions in the novel, the study categorizes CSIs into four types: ecological, linguistic, material, and religious. Using qualitative content analysis, 71 CSIs were identified and analyzed at the lexical level across the spatial depictions of the source and target texts. Following Aixelá's (1996) translation strategies of CSIs, the findings show that conservation strategies such as linguistic translation and orthographic adaptation are primarily applied to ecological CSIs, while substitution strategies, particularly limited and absolute universalization, dominate the translation of linguistic, material, and religious CSIs. The results suggest that in translating the CSIs within the spatial depictions of *Frog*, substitution strategies are employed more frequently than conservation strategies, reflecting Goldblatt's tendency to adapt culturally specific content for greater accessibility and contextual relevance in the target language. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between cultural representation and translation in literary works, and offers practical insights for the translation of CSIs in spatial depictions.

Index Terms—translation strategies, spatial depiction, culture-specific items, *Frog*

I. INTRODUCTION

The introduction of Chinese literature to the English-speaking world has been effectively facilitated by the efforts of native English translators, whose work not only enhances cross-cultural communication but also serves as a valuable reference for future translation endeavors in this field. As a result, Goldblatt's translation has attracted sustained scholarly interest, leading to continuous academic discussions (Fang, 2024). It is widely recognized that Mo Yan's works would not have gained as much international recognition without Goldblatt's translation (Fang, 2024). Among the many novels translated by Goldblatt, *Frog* (蛙) became the first work that Goldblatt translated after the Chinese writer Mo Yan was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012. *Frog* is a work that took Mo Yan over a decade to complete and earned him the 8th Mao Dun Literature Award, one of the highest honors in Chinese literature. *Frog* was published less than three years before Mo Yan received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012 (Foley, 2024). Unlike Mo Yan's earlier works, *Frog* offers a profound reflection on historical realities. By portraying the experiences of Gugu (aunt), a rural doctor dedicated to infertility treatments, the novel chronicles sixty years of rural childbearing history of New China and the complexities in the implementation of the family planning policy (Yang, 2023).

The novel is centered around Northeast Gaomi Township, a region where China's family planning policy was strictly enforced. Countless areas across China experienced similar enforcement, making Northeast Gaomi Township a microcosm of the broader implementation of the policy. *Frog* includes both real and imagined locations. While settings like the Liuyang River and Mount Tai ground the story in reality, the author also constructs imagined places like Northeast Gaomi Township, Dongfeng Village, and so forth. These elements create a layered spatial landscape that reflects both historical reality and artistic imagination. The geospace in the novel is not merely a background setting but also an important narrative device that drives the plot, shapes characters, and reinforces themes. It encapsulates historical, cultural, and social transformations, grounding the story in reality while maintaining its unique literary creativity. As explained by Sun and He (2024), literary geospace includes the spatial framework in which geographic elements evolve in response to characters' actions. Departing from the abstract notions of "space" in postmodern

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thought, the concept is rooted in the physical settings familiar to the author. It incorporates the objective features of the landscape, such as topography, and human interventions, as well as the subjective impressions and sentiments that shape geographical imagination. These two components are informed by the author's mental mapping of a particular location.

Given that the original novel is rich in spatial depiction associated with culture-specific items (hereafter CSIs), such as Kang (炕), which is a typical heated brick bed used for sleeping and living in northern rural China, and Ya Men (衙门), which refers to a traditional government office or magistrate's court in imperial China, Goldblatt's translation, particularly regarding CSIs in the geospace, is worth further exploration. Due to the complex nature of translating CSIs in spatial depiction, translators must act as intermediaries between two cultures with differing perspectives and thought patterns. As Olk (2001) pointed out, cultural references include lexical items that may not exist in the target culture or may possess different connotative or denotative meanings compared to their counterparts in the target language. Linguistic and cultural disparities often present substantial obstacles in translation. A lack of cultural sensitivity or misinterpretation of the source text can result in distorted or inappropriate renditions (Al Tenaijy & Al-Batineh, 2024). Consequently, it becomes essential to select context-appropriate strategies. Translators must possess a strong awareness of cultural variation to convey the intended meanings effectively (Zagood et al., 2023).

Previous studies (e.g., Turzynski-Azimi, 2021; Amenador & Wang, 2022; Helyes, 2025) have investigated the additional strain introduced by CSIs in the translation process. However, little attention has been paid to CSIs in the spatial depiction. Thus, this study intends to investigate the distribution of CSIs in the spatial depiction in Mo Yan's novel *Frog* and to analyze the translation strategies and methods in rendering these CSIs to reveal how the translator Howard Goldblatt addresses these linguistic challenges.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Previous Studies on Howard Goldblatt's Translation of *Frog*

Howard Goldblatt's translation of *Frog* has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly regarding his handling of complex linguistic expressions. Based on the translation strategies of domestication and foreignization, Yan (2022) analyzed Goldblatt's rendering of idioms and culture-loaded words in *Frog*. The findings suggest that domestication is necessary for certain expressions that may lead to cultural conflicts and for expressions rich in Chinese cultural characteristics, foreignization is recommended to preserve cultural authenticity. Similarly, Yang (2023) explored how Goldblatt integrated different translation strategies like domestication and foreignization, as well as literal and free translation to maintain both readability and cultural authenticity in *Frog* under the guidance of Homi Bhabha's hybrid theory. Moreover, Yu et al. (2024) compared the translation strategies used by Howard Goldblatt in his English rendition of *Frog* and Amilton Reis in his Portuguese version. The study found that while Goldblatt's translation was largely reader-oriented, Reis's strategy was even more focused on the target audience, providing insight into how translation choices influence the reception of Mo Yan's work in different linguistic and cultural contexts. This comparative perspective sheds light on how varying translation strategies may influence the reception of Mo Yan's work across different linguistic and cultural contexts.

B. Definitions and Classifications of CSIs

Scholars have used different definitions for culturally loaded items, which means that there is no single term to describe entities that are familiar in one culture but unknown in another, whether they are concepts, words, expressions, institutions, or objects (Amenador & Wang, 2022). According to Marco (2019), these entities are categorized under different names, such as "culture-specific, culture-bound expressions/items/terms/references/elements" or "cultural references". Some scholars prefer the term "culture-loaded words" to describe these entities (Zhou & Hua, 2021; Xuan, 2024).

Given the challenges that arise when translating CSIs, Aixelá (1996) pointed out that some items in the source text do not have direct equivalents in the target culture or carry a different status in the target reader's cultural system. Moreover, Baker (2000) proposed a broad definition, noting that certain words in the source language express concepts that are completely unfamiliar to the target culture. These concepts can be abstract or concrete and may relate to religion, social customs, or food. Such items are often referred to as "culture-specific". Leppihalme (2011) described culture-specific expressions as concepts rooted in a source culture that cannot be precisely translated into the target culture. Despite the differences in terms and definitions for CSIs, the main idea conveyed is that they belong specifically to the source culture in contrast to another culture.

Many attempts have also been made to classify the types of CSIs, though scholars have proposed different categorizations which are based on multiple factors, such as the semantic meaning of CSIs and their cultural background (Amenador & Wang, 2022). Among these classifications, Newmark (1988) offers a relatively detailed classification, organizing CSIs according to their semantic functions, such as ecology, material culture, social culture, and sociocultural practices including customs and institutional concepts. In contrast, Nida (2004) proposes a more generalized framework, dividing CSIs into five broad categories: ecological, linguistic, religious, material, and social culture.

C. Strategies for Translating CSIs

A number of scholars have proposed various frameworks to address the challenges of translating CSIs, each offering distinctive taxonomies and strategic approaches. Tomaszkiwicz (1993) introduced an early model consisting of eight strategies: omission, literal translation, borrowing, equivalence, adaptation, replacement, generalization, and explication. Building on this foundation, Aixelá (1996) presented a more systematic classification, dividing strategies into two main categories: conservation and substitution. Additionally, Aixelá (1996) outlined three potential strategies: compensation, dislocation, and attenuation. Although different in terminology, most categorization approaches share a common orientation, which is either directed toward preserving the distinct features of the source text or modifying them to better suit the expectations and cultural context of the target audience. This tendency corresponds to the widely recognized continuum between foreignization and domestication.

In a related study, Olk (2013) outlined seven strategies grounded in the exoticization versus naturalization continuum. The first four include transference, transference with explicitation, transference with explanation, and target language expressions that refer to the source culture, all of which tend to preserve source cultural markers. The remaining three are neutral explanation, omission, and substitution using target culture equivalents, which reflect naturalizing tendencies that prioritize cultural accessibility.

From a different perspective, Newmark (1998) offered a comprehensive set of twelve translation procedures, including transference, cultural equivalent, neutralization, literal translation, label, naturalization, componential analysis, deletion, couplet, accepted standard translation, paraphrase/gloss/notes, and classifier. However, this taxonomy has been criticized for its repetitive elements and its lack of systematic organization (Marco, 2019).

These theoretical constructs collectively underscore the methodological plurality inherent in CSI translation studies, forming a critical basis for subsequent empirical analysis and supporting informed decision-making in culturally complex translation contexts. Among these strategies, Aixelá’s framework has provided valuable guidance for translation research. Wang and Wang (2016) have noted that among works on cultural term translation, Aixelá’s contribution is particularly influential, offering practical insights for translating CSIs.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Aixelá (1996) proposed eleven strategies for rendering CSIs, which fall into two categories: conservation and substitution. Conservation includes methods such as repetition, orthographic adaptation, linguistic translation, extratextual gloss, and intratextual gloss. Substitution involves synonymy, limited universalization, absolute universalization, naturalization, deletion, and autonomous creation. In addition, Aixelá (1996) also mentioned three possible strategies: compensation, dislocation, and attenuation. The relationship between conservation and substitution translation strategies is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
AIXELÁ’S FRAME FOR RENDERING CSIS

Aixelá’s Frame	
Conservation	Repetition
	Orthographic Adaptation
	Linguistic Translation
	Extratextual Gloss
	Intratextual Gloss
	Synonymy
	Limited Universalization
	Absolute Universalization
	Naturalization
	Deletion
Substitution	Autonomous Creation

It should be noted that Aixelá’s study of repetition as a translation method is based on English-Spanish translation, given that both languages originate from the Indo-European language family (Fang, 2024). However, this method is not commonly used in Chinese-to-English translation, as these languages belong to distinct linguistic systems. Chinese is part of the Sino-Tibetan language family (Yitong, 2020) and differs from English in its written form, phonetic structure, and linguistic application (Tianli & Chen, 2024). Therefore, repetition will be excluded from this study. Moreover, extratextual gloss provides explanations beyond the main text, using footnotes, endnotes, or glossaries to clarify certain terms or concepts. Since the novel does not include such elements, extratextual gloss will not be considered in this study.

Conversely, methods like synonymy, limited universalization, absolute universalization, naturalization, and autonomous creation exist on a scale of substitution, ranging from minimal to extensive modification of the source text (Fang, 2024). Synonymy is primarily concerned with preserving the stylistic qualities of a term. Limited universalization, absolute universalization, and naturalization follow a gradual transition from the source culture toward the target culture. Deletion is typically motivated by ideological factors, political correctness, or contextual significance (Fang, 2024). Autonomous creation is adapted for specific target audiences or particular purposes, such as subtitle translation or advertisement translation. These methods generally prioritize the target culture or the expectations of the

target readers. As this study focuses on the cultural and linguistic characteristics of CSIs in spatial depiction, the methods of synonymy, extratextual gloss, deletion, and autonomous creation will not be included. The adapted frame for this study is presented below.

TABLE 2
ADAPTED FRAME FOR THIS STUDY

Strategies	Methods
Conservation	Orthographic Adaptation Linguistic Translation Intratextual Gloss
Substitution	Limited Universalization Absolute Universalization Naturalization

IV. METHOD

This study employs the method of qualitative content analysis to address the two research questions. Content analysis is a commonly utilized method in qualitative research, focusing on breaking down narratives into smaller sections for structured examination and interpretation (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Neuendorf (2017) characterizes it as a systematic and impartial technique for analyzing message properties, including both manual and computer-assisted coding processes. Content analysis is useful in recognizing distinct messages such as the spatial depiction and the translation strategies employed for CSIs in this study.

The data of the study consists of two parts. The source text (ST) is *Wa* (蛙) by Mo Yan and the target text (TT) is *Frog* translated by Howard Goldblatt. The narrative mainly follows the life of Gugu (Aunt), also called Wanxin (万心), as recounted by the first-person narrator Tadpole, who is also known as Wanzu (万足). He tells the story through letters to the Japanese writer Shan'guyiren (杉谷义人). Structurally, the novel adopts Mo Yan's unique storytelling approach, consisting of five sections: four letters addressed to a Japanese writer and a nine-act play that blurs the line between fiction and reality (Foley, 2024). However, in order to maintain consistency in the analysis, this study examines only the first four chapters of the novel, leaving out the fifth section in play format. Meanwhile, the content unrelated to spatial depiction is excluded from consideration.

The data collection process in this study involves two steps. First, a close reading of *Frog* is conducted to manually extract geospace-related terms, such as specific place names, natural landscapes, and culturally significant locations. Their corresponding English translations are also identified. Second, based on Nida's (2004) cultural classification framework and the linguistic characteristics of spatial depictions in the novel, these terms are categorized into four groups: ecological, linguistic, material, and religious culture.

After the data collection, the analysis follows two steps: distribution analysis and decoding. First, the distribution of CSIs across the four cultural categories in spatial depiction is statistically analyzed to determine their prominence in *Frog*. Then, to investigate translation strategies, a comparative textual analysis is conducted, comparing each CSI in the ST with its corresponding translation in the TT. Aixelá's (1996) model of CSI translation strategies provides the analytical framework for this process.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Distribution of CSIs in Spatial Depiction in *Frog*

The CSIs in this study were collected and categorized based on Nida's (2004) categorization of culture. Nida (2004) divides culture into five categories, including ecological, linguistic, material, social, and religious culture. Among them, social culture includes political systems, traditional customs and habits, units of measurement, forms of address, moral norms, lifestyles, cultural education, historical background, and so on. Social CSIs refer to the terms related to these domains. In the novel *Frog*, social CSIs mainly involve forms of address, historical and political events, customs and traditions, and units of measurement. However, as this study focuses on CSIs in spatial depiction, social CSIs fall beyond the scope of the present study. Following Nida's (2004) categorization of culture, this study divides the CSIs in Howard Goldblatt's rendering of *Frog* into four categories based on the spatial depiction in the novel: ecological, linguistic, material, and religious culture. In this study, the analysis of CSIs is conducted at the lexical level, where their structure and semantic content in the source text present translation difficulties due to the lack of corresponding equivalents in the target culture.

The identification of CSIs requires cultural categorization for further analysis. While ecological, material, and religious CSIs are relatively straightforward to distinguish, linguistic culture is more complex. Nida defines linguistic culture as language-related differences that manifest at the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical levels, including various linguistic features. Given the linguistic characteristics of this novel and the inherent differences

between English and Chinese, this study focuses on the analysis of four-character phrases, proverbs, and colloquial expressions. These elements illustrate linguistic divergence between the two languages at multiple levels. Proverbs and colloquial phrases typically include language-specific terms, while four-character expressions, common in Chinese literature, often involve allusions, such as Yuan Zai Tian Bian, Jin Zai Yan Qian (远在天边, 近在眼前), which means “as far as the end of the earth, yet right in front of your eyes” (as rendered by Goldblatt). The figure below illustrates the distribution of CSIs in the spatial depiction of *Frog*.

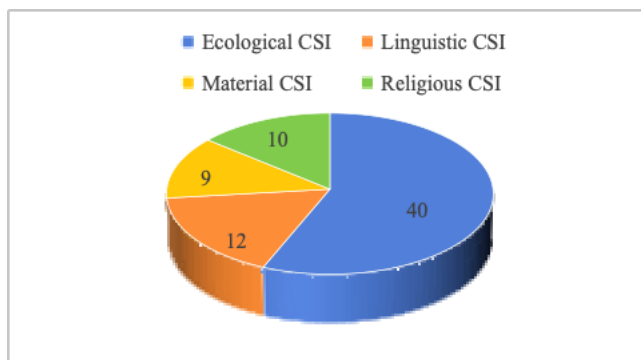


Figure 1. Distribution of CSIs in the Spatial Depiction of *Frog*

In Figure 1, a total of 71 CSIs are identified and collected based on the spatial depiction throughout the novel. Among all categories, the ecological CSIs constitute the largest proportion, with 40 examples. Meanwhile, linguistic CSIs appear 12 times, material CSIs 9 times, and religious CSIs 10 times.

B. Translation Strategies of CSIs in the Spatial Depiction of Frog

(a). Translation Strategies for Rendering Ecological CSIs

As defined by Nida, ecological CSIs refer to names of plants, mountains, and places distinct from the source language (Fang, 2024). In this novel, some places exist in real life, while others are creations of the author, such as Gao Mi Dong Bei Xiang (高密东北乡), Sun Jia Zhuang Zi (孙家庄子), and so on. Translation strategies and methods employed in rendering ecological CSIs are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3
TRANSLATION STRATEGIES AND METHODS FOR RENDERING ECOLOGICAL CSIS

Strategies	Methods	No.	Proportion	Total
Conservation	Orthographic adaptation	6	15%	60%
	Linguistic (non-cultural) translation	17	42.5%	
	Intratextual gloss	1	2.5%	
Substitution	Limited universalization	13	32.5%	40%
	Absolute universalization	2	5%	
	Naturalization	1	2.5%	

As shown in Table 3, conservation serves as the primary translation strategy in rendering ecological CSIs, implemented through orthographic adaptation, linguistic (non-cultural) translation, and intratextual gloss. Among these, linguistic (non-cultural) translation is the most frequently employed method. Here are two examples involving conservation and substitution.

Example 1

ST: 情况我们全部掌握了, 你媳妇, 王家屯王七的老婆, 孙家庄子小金牛的老婆, 还有陈鼻的老婆王胆, 她的月份最大。(Mo, 2009, p. 124)

TT: We have a handle on this. There’s your wife, the wife of Wang Qi at Wang Clan hamlet, the wife of Jin Niu in Sun Family Village, and Wang Dan, Chen Bi’s wife - she’s the farthest along. (Goldblatt, 2015, p. 141)

Wang Jia Tun (王家屯) and Sun Jia Zhuang Zi (孙家庄子) are names of villages in rural China, traditionally named after the dominant family lineage residing there. These names reflect a unique naming convention for villages in China. Goldblatt uses linguistic translation, specifically literal translation of lexical meanings, to retain the structural characteristics of these names while preserving their geographic and social implications. In Chinese village nomenclature, Tun (屯) and Zhuang (庄) carry distinct regional and historical connotations, often indicating settlements formed by extended families or clan-based communities. Such naming conventions are rare in Western cultures. The translation of Tun as hamlet emphasizes its small settlement nature, while Zhuang is translated as village to convey its larger rural scale. Additionally, “Wang Jia” (王家) and “Sun Jia” (孙家) denote villages predominantly inhabited by the Wang and Sun families, reflecting the strong lineage-based community structure in Chinese rural areas. Goldblatt’s use of “Wang Clan” and “Sun Family” effectively conveys the cultural notion of ancestral settlements. Compared to full

transliteration, this method preserves the cultural essence of the original content while presenting the distinctive way Chinese villages are named.

Example 2

ST: 姑姑小时在胶东解放区生活过很长时间，喝过山里的清泉，并跟着八路军学会了刷牙，也许就是这原因，她的牙齿没受毒害。(Mo, 2009, p. 16)

TT: But after spending her youth in the liberated areas of eastern Shandong and drinking spring water, not to mention being taught to brush her teeth by Eighth Route soldiers, Gugu's teeth were spared of that noxious effect. (Goldblatt, 2015, p. 28)

The CSI Jiao Dong (胶东) refers to the eastern part of Shandong Province, including major coastal cities such as Qingdao, Yantai, and Weihai. The term “Jiao” originates from the ancient Jiao State, while “Dong” means “east”, together denoting a region with rich historical and cultural significance. This area is known not only for its deep-rooted traditions and Confucian heritage but also for its important role in China's maritime history and modern development. Rather than transliterating the term “胶东” as Jiao dong, which would retain the original phonetic form but lack semantic clarity for non-Chinese readers, Goldblatt adopts the method of limited universalization by translating it as “eastern Shandong”. This method prioritizes semantic transparency over phonetic fidelity, providing clear spatial orientation while maintaining the referential function of the source term.

(b). Translation Strategies for Rendering Linguistic CSIs

Linguistic CSIs are expressions that reflect the distinctive features of a particular language. According to Nida's definition, linguistic CSIs in this study include four-character words, proverbs, and colloquial expressions, as the use of them makes the language in the text vivid and expressive, such as Tian Nan Hai Bei (天南海北), “from the southern sky to the northern sea”, and Qian Pa Lang, Hou Pa Hu (前怕狼, 后怕虎), “fearful of wolves ahead and tigers behind”. A total of 12 linguistic CSIs in spatial depiction are identified, and the translation methods used for this category are outlined in the following table.

TABLE 4
TRANSLATION STRATEGIES AND METHODS FOR RENDERING LINGUISTIC CSIS

Strategies	Methods	No.	Proportion	Total
Conservation	Orthographic adaptation	-	-	25%
	Linguistic (non-cultural) translation	3	25%	
	Intratextual gloss	-	-	
Substitution	Limited universalization	3	25%	75%
	Absolute universalization	6	50%	
	Naturalization	-	-	

According to the data presented in Table 4, substitution is the dominant strategy in rendering linguistic CSIs, accounting for 75% of the cases through two methods: limited universalization (25%) and absolute universalization (50%). In comparison, conservation constitutes only 25% of the total, with linguistic translation as its only realization method. The representative examples in this category are listed below.

Example 3

ST: 万心，你这个黑了心肝、没了人味的魔鬼……你不得好死……你死后要上刀山，下油锅，剥皮挖眼点天灯。(Mo, 2009, p. 127)

TT: Wan Xin, you black-hearted, inhumane monster... a bad death awaits you... after you die, you'll have to climb a mountain of knives and boil in hot oil, your skin will be peeled, your eyes will be gouged out, and you'll burn from head to toe. (Goldblatt, 2015, p. 145)

In this example, Shang Dao Shan, Xia You Guo (上刀山, 下油锅) literally means “to climb a mountain of knives and to be boiled in a pot of oil”. It is an expression used to curse someone by describing extreme forms of punishment. In example 3, the curse is uttered by Tadpole's mother-in-law, who is filled with intense hatred toward Gugu (Wan Xin) for leading a team to arrest her pregnant daughter, Wang Renmei, who was carrying a second child in violation of the family planning policy. The fierce malediction is not merely a linguistic expression but also a powerful emotional outburst rooted in maternal anger and grief. In the TT, the expression is rendered literally as “climb a mountain of knives and boil in hot oil”. This choice demonstrates the application of linguistic (non-cultural) translation, as Goldblatt preserves the surface meaning and powerful imagery of the source text without adapting it to the target culture. The method conveys the emotional intensity and expressive tone of the original.

Example 4

ST: 我跟那些眼观六路、耳听八方的鱼贩子混得很熟。他们为什么要眼观六路、耳听八方呢? (Mo, 2009, p. 63)

TT: By then I was palling around with those sharp-eyed, keen-eared fishmongers. Why sharp-eyed and keen-eared? (Goldblatt, 2015, p. 81)

Yan Guan Liu Lu, Er Ting Ba Fang (眼观六路, 耳听八方) combines two parallel expressions that describe an extraordinary level of sensory alertness. “眼观六路” refers to being able to observe in all six directions, including up,

down, front, back, left and right, while “耳听八方” suggests listening to sounds coming from all directions, typically referring to the eight points of the compass. Together, the expression is used to describe individuals who are cautious, alert, and fully aware of everything happening around them. In Goldblatt’s translation, this expression becomes “sharp-eyed, keen-eared”, which conveys the general sense of attentiveness. It demonstrates the method of absolute universalization, where the translator omits culturally specific metaphors and replaces them with plain, general language that performs a similar communicative function in the target language. This method prioritizes functional clarity over cultural retention.

(c). *Translation Strategies for Rendering Material CSIs*

Material CSIs include a wide range of categories like food, clothing, architecture, transportation, arts, and science. In *Frog*, Mo Yan mainly reflects material culture in his geospatial descriptions through references to architecture. The following table outlines the strategies and methods used in translating material CSIs.

TABLE 5
TRANSLATION STRATEGIES AND METHODS FOR RENDERING MATERIAL CSIS

Strategies	Methods	No.	Proportion	Total
Conservation	Orthographic adaptation	1	11.1%	22.2%
	Linguistic (non-cultural) translation	1	11.1%	
Substitution	Intratextual gloss	-	-	77.7%
	Limited universalization	3	33.3%	
	Absolute universalization	4	44.4%	
	Naturalization	-	-	

Table 5 shows that substitution is the primary strategy employed in translating material CSIs, realized through the methods of limited universalization and absolute universalization. In contrast, conservation appears less frequently and is represented by orthographic adaptation and linguistic translation. Two specific examples are provided to illustrate each of these strategies in detail.

Example 5

ST: 她扔下药箱，一个箭步冲上去，左手抓住那老婆子的左臂，右手抓住老婆子的右肩，用力往右后方一别，就把老婆子甩在了炕下。(Mo, 2009, p. 17)

TT: She dropped her medical kit, ran up and, with her left hand on the old woman’s left arm and her right hand on her right shoulder, yanked her off the kang. (Goldblatt, 2015, p. 29)

The material CSI Kang (炕) refers to a traditional heated platform bed commonly found in northern China. Built from brick or clay and connected to a stove system, it not only provides warmth during the cold seasons but also functions as a multifunctional space where people eat, rest, and sleep. Rather than translating this term descriptively (e.g., “heated brick bed”), Goldblatt opts for orthographic adaptation, rendering it as “kang”. This method retains the original term’s phonological form in Pinyin without cultural explanation or substitution, which helps to preserve the cultural specificity and regional flavor rooted in the ST.

Example 6

ST: 那个坐在麒麟上的女子，面如银盆，目若朗星，怀里抱着一个粉嘟嘟的婴儿。(Mo, 2009, p. 234)

TT: A woman sitting atop the unicorn, her face like a silver plate, eyes like bright stars, holding a chubby pink infant. (Goldblatt, 2015, p. 251)

Qi Lin (麒麟) refers to a legendary creature in Chinese mythology, often associated with auspiciousness, benevolence, and the birth of sages. With its dragon-like head, deer-like body, and divine aura, it serves as a significant cultural symbol in Chinese tradition. In the TT, the CSI is rendered as “unicorn”, a Western mythical creature known for its purity and elegance. While the unicorn also belongs to the category of benevolent mythical beasts, its cultural origins and symbolic connotations differ from those of the Qi Lin. This method presents limited universalization, in which a culturally specific item is replaced by a more general and culturally accessible counterpart in the target language. Although the unique cultural background of the Qi Lin is not preserved, the TT conveys a sense of mysticism and nobility, making the scene easier to visualize in the target language.

(d). *Translation Strategies for Rendering Religious CSIs*

Religious SCIs refer to expressions related to belief, worship, and traditional customs. In *Frog*, these items are closely connected to the daily lives of the people in Gaomi Northeast Township. They show respect and fear toward nature and unseen forces. For example, Niang Niang Miao (娘娘庙) is a place where people pray for children, and Feng Shui (风水) is used to decide whether a location is good for living or building. Mo Yan’s use of magic realism makes the religious and mystical atmosphere in the novel even stronger. The translation strategies and methods for rendering religious CSIs in spatial depiction are presented in Table 6.

TABLE 6
TRANSLATION STRATEGIES AND METHODS FOR RENDERING RELIGIOUS CSIS

Strategies	Methods	No.	Proportion	Total
Conservation	Orthographic adaptation	1	10%	30%
	Linguistic (non-cultural) translation	2	20%	
	Intratextual gloss	-	-	
Substitution	Limited universalization	6	60%	70%
	Absolute universalization	1	10%	
	Naturalization	-	-	

According to Table 6, the dominant translation strategy for religious CSIs is substitution, primarily realized through limited universalization (60%) and absolute universalization (10%). In contrast, conservation is less frequently employed and is realized through orthographic adaptation (10%) and linguistic translation (20%). Two examples are provided below to demonstrate how these strategies and methods are applied through specific methods.

Example 7

ST: 我与小狮子之所以选择回乡定居，是因为我们在北京的护国寺大街上，遭遇过一件类似的事情。(Mo, 2009, p. 258)

TT: The reason Little Lion and I had decided to return home was that we'd experienced something similar near the Huguo Temple in Beijing. (Goldblatt, 2015, p. 274)

Hu Guo Si (护国寺) is a historic Buddhist temple located in the Xicheng District of Beijing. Officially named Huguo Renwang Temple, it was built during the Yuan Dynasty and holds considerable religious and historical significance. In the ST, the geographical location Hu Guo Si Da Jie (护国寺大街) refers to a street named after the temple, which is not only famous for its traditional snacks. In the TT, the term is rendered as "near the Huguo Temple". Rather than translating the street name directly as "Huguosi Street", Goldblatt simplifies the reference by using the nearby landmark, the temple itself. This method avoids unfamiliar street names that may confuse readers, while still conveying the general idea of a recognizable place in Beijing.

Example 8

ST: 我的犹豫、彷徨、被刺、被打、被辱骂、被追杀就像唐三藏取经路上所经受的八十一难。(Mo, 2009, p. 265)

TT: All my doubts, wavering, torment, beatings, humiliation, and being pursued were necessary steps in the process. Like the Tang monk Tripitaka, who encountered eighty-one trials on his trip to India for the Buddhist scriptures. (Goldblatt, 2015, p. 282)

The expression Qu Jing Lu Shang (取经路上) originates from the Chinese literary classic *Journey to the West*, referring to the journey of Tang Monk and his three disciples from China to India to obtain sacred Buddhist scriptures. Over time, this expression has taken on a broader metaphorical meaning in Chinese, symbolizing a long and arduous quest for truth, belief, or a higher goal. In the TT, this expression is rendered as "his trip to India for the Buddhist scriptures". Instead of using culturally marked phrases such as "Journey to the West" or "pilgrimage", Goldblatt chooses to reconstruct the meaning in a more explicit and accessible way. The expression "trip to India" clearly identifies the geographical direction of the journey, while "for the Buddhist scriptures" specifies its purpose. Taken together, the components reflect the core meaning of the original, describing a long and meaningful journey undertaken for religious enlightenment, while remaining accessible to those unfamiliar with the cultural background.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study presents Howard Goldblatt's English translation of CSIs in the spatial depiction of Mo Yan's *Frog*, with a focus on their distribution and the specific strategies and methods used to render the four cultural categories. Guided by Nida's (2004) classification of culture and the linguistic characteristics of spatial depictions in the novel, the study identifies four cultural dimensions of CSIs: ecological, linguistic, material, and religious. Meanwhile, this study adopted Aixelá's (1996) framework to analyze the specific methods used in translating CSIs across four CSI categories, revealing Goldblatt's deliberate balance between conservation and substitution when dealing with complex CSIs.

The findings indicate that conservation strategies, such as linguistic translation and orthographic adaptation, were predominantly used for ecological CSIs, maintaining a strong link to the source culture's geographical identity. Substitution strategies, including limited and absolute universalization, were more frequently applied to linguistic, material, and religious CSIs, enabling clearer communication with the target readers while mitigating potential cultural misunderstandings. In general, Goldblatt employed substitution strategies more frequently than conservation strategies when dealing with CSIs in the spatial depictions of *Frog*.

Nevertheless, the study has certain limitations. It only focuses on CSIs in the spatial depiction of the translated text. Therefore, future research can be conducted from different perspectives, such as investigating CSIs in character portrayal, temporal description, or even across the entire narrative. Another limitation of this study is that the analysis of CSIs is only conducted at the lexical level, without considering syntactic or discourse-level strategies. Future study is suggested to integrate insights from discourse analysis or functional linguistics to enrich the investigation.

Although there are some limitations in this study, it is still hoped that the present study can serve as a useful reference for the translation of CSIs in spatial depiction within the field of literary translation studies. Moreover, it is expected that Chinese rural literature will receive more scholarly attention and inspire further translation studies in this area.

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