

Translator Behavior Criticism: German Translation of Culture-Loaded Words in *The Seventh Day*

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This study employs Zhou Lingshun's translator behavior criticism as its theoretical framework to systematically analyze the German translator Ulrich Kautz's strategies in handling culture-loaded words in his translation of Yu Hua's *The Seventh Day*, from both intra-translational and extra-translational perspectives. The findings reveal that Kautz consistently adhered to the "truth-seeking and utility-attaining" continuum principle, employing diverse strategies, such as transliteration, literal translation, free translation, and adaptation to strike a balance between preserving source-culture heterogeneity and ensuring target-reader comprehension. On the extra-translational level, his identity as a translator, reader awareness, and selection criteria highlights a utility-oriented approach; on the intra-translational level, his treatment of five categories of culture-loaded words—ecological, material, social, religious, and linguistic—demonstrates a dual commitment to semantic accuracy and cultural adaptation. Kautz's translation practice not only offers a model for disseminating Chinese literature in the German-speaking world but also validates the applicability and practical significance of translator behavior criticism in literary translation studies.

Keywords: translator behavior criticism, culture-loaded words, Ulrich Kautz, *The Seventh Day*

Introduction

With the deepening dissemination of contemporary Chinese literature overseas, the translation of culture-loaded words has gradually become a focal point in academic research. Yu Hua's *The Seventh Day* contains a wealth of cultural images distinctive to China, and its German translation demonstrates clear translator orientations and strategic choices in handling these culture-loaded terms.

This paper adopts Zhou Lingshun's translator behavior criticism as its theoretical framework to examine Ulrich Kautz's translation strategies for culture-loaded words in the German version of *The Seventh Day* from both intra-translational and extra-translational perspectives. It analyzes how he seeks balance within the "truth-seeking-utility-attaining" continuum. Furthermore, through the lens of five categories of culture-loaded words—ecological, material, social, religious, and linguistic—the study explores the translator's strategic choices in specific examples and discusses the practical implications of translator behavior criticism in literary translation research.

Overview of Translator Behavior Criticism Theory

"Translator behavior criticism" is an original theoretical system proposed by Chinese scholar Professor Zhou

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Lingshun, following “Variation Translation Theory” and “Eco-translatology”. This theory takes the translator as its research focus, exploring the interactive relationship between the translator and the translated text from both intra-translational and extra-translational perspectives. It investigates the internal and external factors influencing translator behavior during the text-generation process from linguistic and social dimensions.

Translator behavior criticism theory posits that translation is not merely a conversion between two language codes at the linguistic level, but also a complex social activity involving various stages, from text selection and market circulation to social acceptance (Zhou, 2014, p. 25). Translator behavior is defined as “the sum of the translator’s linguistic translation acts and social non-translation acts from a societal perspective”. Based on this, research on translator behavior can be divided into two aspects: “intra-translation” and “extra-translation”. “Intra-translation” research refers to the study of the degree of truth-seeking in the text under the guidance of fidelity, focusing on the translation’s faithfulness to the author and the original text. “Extra-translation” research refers to the study of the text-generation environment and the degree of utility-attainment beyond the text, emphasizing the practical extent to which the translation serves society (Zhou, 2014, p. 13).

The “Truth-Seeking-Utility-Attaining” Continuum Mode of Evaluation

Based on the research perspectives of “intra-translation” and “extra-translation”, the theory of translator behavior criticism integrates the translator’s “linguisticity” and “sociality”, while balancing the “author/source text” and the “reader/society”. This leads to the establishment of the “Truth-Seeking-Utility-Attaining” continuum mode of evaluation for assessing translator behavior. “Truth-seeking” refers to the translator’s act of fully or partially pursuing the truth of the meaning carried by the source language to achieve the goal of serving the practical needs of readers and society. “Utility-attaining” refers to the attitudes and methods adopted by the translator, based on fully or partially fulfilling truth-seeking, to meet practical requirements (Zhou, 2010, p. 95). The translator’s task is to exercise subjective initiative in finding a balance between truth-seeking and utility-attaining, ensuring that translation retains its fundamental nature while fulfilling its social function.

Extra-translational Investigation: Social Behavior

The extra-translational investigation of translator behavior primarily involves the translator’s social conduct, including macro cultural contexts, micro textual factors, and translator subjectivity. The translator’s behavior in the German translation of *The Seventh Day* demonstrates significant utility-attaining characteristics, specifically reflected in the following three aspects.

Translator Identity

Ulrich Kautz is a renowned German sinologist and translator who has translated a substantial number of mid-length and full-length novels by contemporary Chinese writers. In 2007, he was awarded the “Special Book Award of China” by the Chinese government. Initially employed by the German Federal Foreign Office, he transitioned to the education sector after leaving diplomacy, with literary translation originally being merely a hobby. In the 1980s, a chance opportunity opened the door for him to translate and introduce Chinese literature. Since then, he has worked diligently, translating nearly 40 contemporary Chinese literary works and film adaptation scripts, covering many representative Chinese writers, such as Wang Meng, Deng Youmei, Lu Wenfu, and Yu Hua. In his translation practice, Kautz flexibly employs various strategies to effectively address cultural default phenomena in texts, ensuring the transmission of source culture characteristics while safeguarding the

reading experience of target language readers. This fully demonstrates his adherence to the principle of utilitarian translation.

Reader Awareness

Influenced by Nida and German functionalist translation theories, Ulrich Kautz adopts reader-oriented functional equivalence as his literary translation criterion: “During the translation process, I primarily consider the ‘average reader,’ taking into account the comprehension level of ordinary people. My translation practice is fundamentally built upon this principle” (Wang, 2021, p. 94). When reading the original work, he contemplates the author’s creative concepts from dual perspectives—both the author’s and the reader’s—while investing his own emotions, empathizing with or disliking various characters in the text. On this basis, he reconstructs the German text to ensure its impact on German readers aligns as closely as possible with that of the source text on Chinese readers (Gao, 2015, p. 10). Additionally, Kautz emphasizes the continuous improvement of his language proficiency. In addition to reading Chinese literary works daily, he closely follows new publications in German literature, maintaining a strong connection with his native literary tradition. This enables his translations to linguistically meet the needs of readers (Du, 2014).

Selection Principles

Kautz consistently adheres to a fundamental principle in selecting works for translation: He chooses only works by authors he genuinely appreciates and acknowledges, placing high value on the literary quality and intrinsic worth of the texts. This selection tendency is closely linked to the tradition of the German literary public sphere, which has long been characterized by a distinct political and social critical consciousness (Gu, 2021, p. 194). Chinese literature, with its inherent complexity of “highly blending politics and art, the individual and the collective, private experience and national history”, naturally aligns with this context (Sun & Li, 2021, p. 149). Consequently, thematic works, such as “overseas Chinese writers”, “critical realism”, “controversial series”, and “exotic settings” often become preferred choices for translation. However, Kautz astutely points out that “this interest is not in Chinese literature per se, but in China’s national conditions. Thus, such interest is inevitably a short-lived phenomenon and cannot be sustained indefinitely” (Gao, 2015, p. 8). In his view, precisely for this reason, it is essential to uphold literariness and intrinsic value as the core criteria for selection, avoiding oversimplification or labeling of Chinese literature, thereby fostering meaningful cultural dialogue.

Intra-translational Investigation: Linguistic Behavior

The Seventh Day, as a literary work profoundly reflecting Chinese characteristics, contains a vast number of culture-loaded words. Culture-loaded words are terms, phrases, and idioms that denote elements unique to a specific culture. These lexical items reflect the distinct ways accumulated by a nation over its long historical development, setting it apart from other nations (Liao, 2000, p. 31). Nida categorized culture into five types based on its distinctive features: ecological, material, social, religious, and linguistic (Nida, 1964). Drawing on Nida’s cultural classification framework, this study similarly divides culture-loaded words into these five corresponding categories. In this section, based on the “Truth-Seeking-Utility-Attaining” continuum mode of evaluation, the author conducts a detailed analysis of the culture-loaded words in the German translation of *The Seventh Day*, exploring how translator Ulrich Kautz balances his dual attributes as a translator during the translation process.

Ecological Culture-Loaded Words

Ecological culture-loaded words encompass vocabulary related to natural topography, regional characteristics, flora and fauna species, and climatic conditions (Huang, 2004). Based on their specific definitions, the ecological culture-loaded words collected in *The Seventh Day* are categorized into three types: those related to natural phenomena, those related to plants and animals, and those related to geography. In the translation process, the translator should balance the differences between the two cultures, exercise subjective initiative, and consider both truth-seeking and utility-attaining.

Example 1.

Original: 这一年休假的时候，我带着他去了黄山，这是他第一次也是最后一次出门旅游。(Yu, 2013, p. 80)

Translation: Im Urlaub fuhr ich in jenem Jahr mit ihm ins Huangshan-Gebirge, das war für ihn die erste und auch die letzte Urlaubsreise. (Yu, 2017, p. 102)

Here, “Huangshan” refers to Mount Huangshan located in Huangshan City, Anhui Province. Since there is no corresponding geographical concept for “黄山” in German, the translator adopted the translation method of transliteration plus a generic term, rendering Huangshan as “Huangshan-Gebirge”. It is important to clarify that the “黄” in Huangshan does not refer to its color, but originates from the legend of the Yellow Emperor refining elixirs and ascending to immortality. According to legend, while searching for a sacred site for cultivation, the Yellow Emperor arrived at Huangshan, found it filled with immortal energy and swirling clouds, and decided to reside there to refine divine pills. To commemorate the Yellow Emperor’s practices, Emperor Xuanzong of Tang officially renamed the mountain from “Yishan” to “Huangshan” in the sixth year of the Tianbao era (747 AD). Therefore, translating Huangshan as “Gelbes Gebirge” would be clearly inappropriate. Considering the context, this passage emphasizes the final journey rather than the destination. Based on this, the translator’s chosen approach is reasonable: It moderately seeks truth by preserving the heterogeneous elements of the original through transliteration, while effectively attaining utility by ensuring target-language readers’ correct understanding of the place name through the addition of a generic term.

Example 2.

Original: 第五天，她的男朋友仍然没有在空间上现身，她骂他是缩头乌龟，然后宣布自己不想活了，而且公布了自己准备自杀的时间和地点。时间是翌日中午，地点先是定在大桥上，她计划跳河自杀。(Yu, 2013, p. 117)

Translation: Als auch nach fünf Tagen noch kein Lebenszeichen von ihm da war, beschimpfte sie erst ihn als erbärmlichen Feigling und kündigte dann an—alles auf Qzone—, sie wolle nicht mehr weiterleben und werde am nächsten Tag zur Mittagsstunde Selbstmord begehen. (Yu, 2017, p. 130)

Here, Shumei discovers that the mobile phone her boyfriend gave her is a counterfeit. Unable to contact him due to his phone service being suspended, she uses “缩头乌龟” to sarcastically criticize him for being timid and avoiding responsibility. However, there is no corresponding cultural image in German culture. Thus, the translator renders “缩头乌龟” as “erbärmlichen Feigling” (wretched coward), demonstrating a clear utility-attaining tendency. He proactively abandons the unique cultural image of the original text, adopting a German term that is semantically equivalent, emotionally strong, and conforms to target-language expression habits. By using a free translation approach to accommodate target-language readers, he successfully finds a balance point on the continuum: By altering the form of expression, he maximizes the effective transmission of the core semantics and emotions of the original text in the target context.

Material Culture-Loaded Words

Material culture-loaded words refer to terms denoting objects uniquely created or exclusively possessed by various ethnic groups that are related to people's daily lives, including tools, utensils, equipment, products, etc. (Wei, 2015, p. 67). However, the academic community has not yet provided a detailed classification of material culture-loaded words. Drawing on the perspectives of multiple scholars, the author categorizes the material culture-loaded words collected in the book into four types: those related to clothing, those related to food, those related to architecture, and those related to tools.

Example 3.

Original: 她打量起了我的衣着，她说：“你的寿衣怎么像睡衣？”“我穿的是殓衣”，我说。(Yu, 2013, p. 11)

Translation: Sie musterte meine Kleidung und sagte: “Merkwürdig! Mich erinnert Ihr Totenkleid an einen Pyjama.” “Das ist Trauerkleidung”, erwiderte ich. (Yu, 2017, p. 15)

This passage depicts a dialogue between the protagonist Yang Fei and a neighboring woman while awaiting cremation. In Chinese, the terms “寿衣” (shòuyī) and “殓衣” (liànyī) both refer to the same object—clothing worn by the deceased for burial. However, Yang Fei disagrees with the woman's perspective, indicating that these two terms carry distinct meanings in the protagonist's mind. Kautz translates them into entirely different German words: He renders “寿衣” as “Totenkleid” (clothing for the dead), while translating “殓衣” as “Trauerkleidung”, which in German refers to mourning attire worn by family members or funeral attendees. Through Kautz's interpretation, the protagonist, who should be dressed in burial clothes, instead appears clad in mourning garments, transforming from the deceased into a mourner. This subtly emphasizes Yang Fei's profound loneliness—both in life and in the afterlife—as someone perpetually alone, while also reflecting his transition from the living to the dead. In this translation process, the translator fully exercises subjective initiative, skillfully revealing the nuanced difference between “寿衣” and “殓衣” in Yang Fei's consciousness. Although he employs words entirely different from the literal meanings of the original text, he remains deeply faithful to the core meaning the author intends to convey: Yang Fei remains the solitary figure who bids farewell to others and himself. This creative substitution, grounded in profound understanding, exemplifies the translator's utilitarian translation approach aimed at achieving effective communication.

Social Culture-Loaded Words

Social culture-loaded words refer to vocabulary related to the various social activities of human beings—that is, how people interact, how they operate within different organizations, and so on. They essentially cover all non-material aspects, such as associations and organizations, social activities, customs and habits, daily behavioral norms, values, artistic achievements, and historical knowledge (Wei, 2015, p. 66). The novel contains a wealth of social culture-loaded words, such as “公子哥” (dandy), “富婆” (rich woman), “入殓” (encoffining), “定亲” (engagement), “老天爷” (Heavens/God), etc.

Example 4.

Original: 他在美国留生活很多年，不太了解中国现实中的诸多潜规则。(Yu, 2013, p. 45)

Translation: Er hatte ja viele Jahre als Student in Amerika gelebt, so dass er mit zahlreichen ungeschriebenen Gesetzen, die es in der chinesischen Realität zu beachten gilt, nicht vertraut war. (Yu, 2017, p. 52)

“潜规则” is a term that has gradually emerged in Chinese social interactions, referring to an informal rule or convention existing in social activities. Although usually unstated, it is widely observed and followed. Since

there is no exact equivalent term in German, the translator adopts a free translation strategy here, rendering “潜规则” as “ungeschriebenen Gesetzen” (unwritten laws). In this process, the translator’s linguistic nature takes the dominant position, driving a partial pursuit of truth-seeking. It must be emphasized that this “truth-seeking” does not imply sacrificing fidelity. On the contrary, by freely translating the concept of “潜” (hidden/latent), the translator successfully constructs an equivalent expression in the target language, enabling German readers to fully grasp the core connotation of “潜规则” within its specific context. Thus, through the method of free translation, the translator effectively achieves a balance between truth-seeking and utility-attaining.

Religious Culture-Loaded Words

Religious culture refers to a nation’s religious legends, beliefs, and ideologies (Nida, 1945). Chinese culture is deeply influenced by Buddhism and Taoism, and hence religious culture-loaded words frequently appear in literary works, such as “和尚” (monk), “法事” (religious rituals), and “老天爷” (Heaven/God).

Example 5.

Original: 我来到他家时，几个和尚正在那里做超度亡灵的法事。(Yu, 2013, p. 102)

Translation: Als ich in seine Wohnung kam, waren dort mehrere Mönche, versammelt und beteten für das Seelenheil der Verstorbenen. (Yu, 2017, p. 114)

The terms “和尚”, “超度亡灵”, and “法事” in the original text all belong to religious culture-loaded words. Unlike China, which is profoundly influenced by Buddhism, Germany is relatively less affected by Buddhism. Therefore, some concepts lack direct corresponding vocabulary in German. Faced with these three terms, the translator adopted different translation strategies. For the word “和尚”, a corresponding term exists in German (“Mönch”), so the translator employed a literal translation approach. However, no direct German equivalents could be found for the terms “超度亡灵” and “法事”. For the former, the translator used free translation, abandoning the literal form of the culture-specific term and accurately conveying its core religious purpose—praying for the salvation of the souls of the deceased—while employing concepts easily understood within the target culture. This approach not only conveys the original meaning to a considerable extent, but also ensures the readability of the translation. For the term “法事”, the translator adopted a strategy of omitting the noun and replacing it with a descriptive verb phrase. Since the sentence primarily aims to depict the scene of commemorating the deceased, the translator’s strategy avoids using unfamiliar terms or those requiring additional explanation. This results in a concise and fluent translation that focuses on the core action of the scene, achieving utility-attainment based on partial truth-seeking.

Linguistic Culture-Loaded Words

In the translation process, linguistic culture-loaded words (such as four-character idioms, common sayings, and proverbs) often pose significant challenges. They not only carry specific cultural backgrounds, but also contain rich figurative meanings and historical origins. If translated literally, target-language readers may struggle to understand them. Yet, if their cultural imagery is entirely abandoned, the rhetorical style and linguistic features of the original text may be lost. Therefore, the translator must strike a balance between cultural adaptability and semantic accuracy, flexibly employing strategies, such as literal translation, free translation, and compensation to ensure the translation remains faithful to the original meaning while conforming to target-language expression habits.

Four-Character Idioms

Example 6.

Original: 我的家属已经排除十二人对记者严防死守，十二个人刚好是部队一个班的编制，有一个

警卫班保护我，我可以高枕无忧。(Yu, 2013, p. 14)

Translation: Meine Familie hat aber bereits entsprechende Sicherheitsmaßnahmen ergriffen und zwölf Wachmänner dorthin geschickt, die sorgen dafür, dass kein Reporter Zugang erhält. Zwölf Mann, das ist die Sollstärke einer Gruppe in der Armee, da muss ich mir keine Sorgen machen, dass meine Ruhe gestört wird. (Yu, 2017, p. 19)

This dialogue involves a deceased person boasting about their family's efforts to protect their lavish tomb. The idiom “高枕无忧” first appeared in *Strategies of the Warring States*. Its original meaning was “to pillow high and sleep without worry”, later extended to mean “being completely at ease without any concerns”. In the context of the original text, the speaker emphasizes that due to the strict protection of a “squad” of guards, they need not worry about safety or disturbance, thus feeling entirely secure. The translator did not rigidly adhere to the literal form and imagery of the idiom but instead deeply understood its specific meaning within the context. By translating based on this understanding and supplementing the specific content of the concern, the rendering became more precise and fluent. This example fully demonstrates the translator's utilitarian approach and respect for target-language readers' comprehension habits.

Common Sayings and Proverbs

Example 7.

Original: 他们觉得自己一点也不比我差，为此有些愤愤不平，私下里说，鲜花插在牛粪上是真的，癞蛤蟆吃到天鹅肉也是真的。(Yu, 2013, p. 41)

Translation: Außerdem fanden sie, dass sie selbst mir in nichts nachstanden, und waren entsprechend sauer. Untereinander sprachen sie, dies sei mal wieder ein krasser Fall von einer Blüte, die im Kuhfladensteckt, oder sie zitierten das Sprichwort von der Kröte, deren Gelüst nach Schwanenfleisch sonst nie, in diesem Fall aber tatsächlich doch befriedigt wird. (Yu, 2017, pp. 47-48)

This sentence describes Yang Fei's colleagues in the novel *The Seventh Day* gossiping behind his back, believing he is unworthy of his wife Li Qing. The common saying “鲜花插在牛粪上” (A fresh flower stuck in cow dung) is often used to describe an outstanding woman marrying an unworthy man. “癞蛤蟆吃到天鹅肉” (A toad gets to eat swan meat) originates from the saying “癞蛤蟆想吃天鹅肉” (A toad lusting after swan meat), implying overestimating one's abilities and attempting to reach beyond one's grasp. The translator adopted a literal translation strategy for both sayings, preserving the exotic flavor of the original text to the greatest extent. At the same time, readers can clearly infer from the context that these two sayings serve as explanatory supplements to the preceding discussion. Therefore, this approach also aligns with the pragmatic orientation of the translation.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of culture-loaded words in the German translation of *The Seventh Day*, it is evident that Ulrich Kautz consistently negotiates and adjusts within the “truth-seeking–utility-attaining” continuum during the translation process. On one hand, he strives to preserve the cultural images of the source language through methods, such as transliteration and literal translation, demonstrating fidelity to the original work. On the other hand, he adopts strategies like free translation and adaptation when necessary to ensure comprehension and acceptance by target-language readers. This translation practice, which balances both linguistic and social dimensions, exemplifies the interaction between “intra-translational” and “extra-translational” factors

emphasized by translator behavior criticism. At the extra-translational level, Kautz's identity as a translator, reader awareness, and selection principles profoundly influence his translation decisions, highlighting a utility-attaining orientation.

At the intra-translational level, his diverse strategies in handling culture-loaded words reflect efforts toward semantic truth-seeking and cultural representation. The combination of these aspects allows the translation to convey the cultural connotations of the original work while achieving effective communication in a cross-cultural context.

In summary, Kautz's German translation of *The Seventh Day* not only provides a vivid case study for the dissemination of contemporary Chinese literature in the German-speaking world, but also validates the practical significance of translator behavior criticism in literary translation research. The discussion in this paper demonstrates that the translator's choices when dealing with culture-loaded words are both translational acts at the linguistic level and cultural actions at the social level, offering valuable insights for further research on translator behavior in cross-cultural contexts.

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