

A Study on the Cultural Attitude of Translators in Julia Lovell's Translation of *Journey to the West*

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Abstract: *Journey to the West*, as one of the Chinese classical novels, has been widely welcomed by readers for its romantic imagination, humorous language, and heroic adventurous spirit. Julia Lovell's English translation of *Journey to the West*, an important edition in the Penguin Classics series, has had a wide influence on the Western world and is one of the representative English translations that have popularized and promoted the contemporary dissemination of the novel. This paper will explore the translator's cultural attitude on Julia Lovell's translation from the following three aspects: the shaping of character images in the source text, the representation of excellent traditional Chinese culture in the source text, and the aesthetic re-presentation strategies reflected in the translation.

1. Introduction

Journey to the West, as a classic of Chinese classical novels, not only features romantic imagination, humorous language, and heroic adventure spirit but also is rich in cultural elements. This indicates that the quality of translating cultural elements in *Journey to the West* is an important criterion for evaluating the success of its translation, and the translation of cultural elements often depends on the translator's cultural attitude. In February 2021, Penguin Books published the English translation of *Monkey King: Journey to the West* by renowned British sinologist Julia Lovell. Despite numerous previous translations, this version has gained recognition from readers (Zhu Jiachun & Luo Xuanmin, 2022)^[1] and praise from Anglo-American critics (Zhu Mingsheng, 2021)^[2]. Scholars have studied the Blue Translation through perspectives such as reader reception (Zhu Jiachun & Qin Maosheng, 2022)^[3], translation strategies (Zhu Jiachun & Luo Xuanmin, 2022)^[1], translator's conventions (Zao Binji, 2022)^[4], and paratextuality (Cui Zihan, 2022)^[5]. However, no research has examined the translation quality, the translator's cultural attitude, or the underlying causes behind this particular version. It is worth noting that the translation and dissemination of literary classics are closely related to factors such as the quality of the work, publishers' sponsorship, translators' cultural attitudes, and publishers' post-publication services and promotion. The introduction and translation process is actually a process where various subjects cooperate, influence each other, and jointly impact the introduction and translation results, reconstructing the entire translation field and even society.

2. Lovell's Translation Version of *Journey to the West*

As a classic of Chinese classical novels, *Journey to the West* has gained widespread popularity among readers with its romantic imagination, humorous language, and heroic spirit of adventure. To date, the novel has been translated into multiple languages and widely disseminated worldwide. The earliest English translation can be traced back to American missionary Samuel I Woodbridge, who in 1895 translated chapters "The Old Heavenly King's Clumsy Plan Violates the Celestial Law" and "Emperor Tang's Soul Return in the Underworld", which were included in *The Golden-Horned Dragon King: Or The Emperor's Visit to the Spirit World*. Subsequently, British sinologists such as

Herbert A Giles, James Ware, E.T.C. Werner also translated fragments from *Journey to the West*. The first complete standalone English edition was Timothy Richard's 1913 translation titled *A Mission to Heaven, A Great Chinese Epic and Allegory*. Although this version made extensive deletions from the original plot, it holds significant importance in the history of translating and disseminating *Journey to the West*. At present, the English translations of *Journey to the West* that have received the most attention among readers in the English-speaking world include *Monkey: A Folk Tale of China* translated by Arthur Waley, *Journey to the West* translated by Anthony C. Yu and British sinologist Jenner.

In February 2021, the British sinologist Julia Lovell's new English translation of *Monkey King: Journey to the West* was published by the world-famous publisher Penguin Books. This translation is known for its fluent, vivid, and modern English, aimed specifically at the general readership of the contemporary English-speaking world. In recent years, research on Lovell's translation of *Journey to the West* has also been increasing. Wang Feng (2024)^[6] proposed a corpus-based translator behavior criticism method and demonstrated Lovell's translator behavior characteristics in handling derogatory terms through network analysis and clustering analysis, proving that her role as a translator is to retell Chinese classic stories using modern discourse. Gu Siying and Li Xiaoli (2023)^[7] took Lovell's translation of *Journey to the West* as their research object, exploring the subtext design strategies she employed from three dimensions: presenting the original work's features, promoting the spread of the translated version, and facilitating its acceptance. Xu Zongrui and Zhang Yundan (2024)^[8] used software quantification analysis and textual close reading to compare the readability of the Waley and Lovell translations of *Journey to the West*. The results showed that both versions follow the 'consistency' principle and the 'shortening distance' principle to improve readability, while using subtexts to construct narrative contexts and employing combined compilation or translation creation strategies to enhance the story and contemporaneity of the text, thereby improving readability. Zhou Lu (2024)^[9] analyzes the metaphor of "heart" in the translation of *Journey to the West* by Lovell by using the dynamic analysis framework. This reveals that the study of Lovell's translation of *Journey to the West* not only has significant reference value for the translation and dissemination of the novel but also for other literary classics.

3. Research on Translator's Cultural Attitudes

In 1990, Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere co-edited the translation studies anthology *Translation, History and Culture*, formally introducing the "cultural turn in translation" (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990)^[10]. This paradigm shift changed translation studies from a purely linguistic focus to examining cultural interplay. The new theoretical framework situated translation within broader cultural contexts for study and analysis, instead of viewing translation as mere linguistic conversion or textual interaction. Consequently, translators' cultural perspectives became essential considerations in scholarly discourse.

Chinese scholar Wang Dongfeng (1998)^[11] developed the concept of translator's cultural attitude based on Evan-Zohar's multilevel system theory. In his study, he argued that translation, as a cultural exchange activity, inherently involves power dynamics between different ethnic groups. The cultural authority and attitudes represented by translators during translation processes inevitably influence their language choices and strategies. This concept has drawn wide attention and received scholarly responses, demonstrating that translators' cultural attitudes remain an essential topic in literary translation studies. This is particularly evident in the analysis of Julia Lovell's translation of *Journey to the West*. The following key aspects of translators' cultural attitude in Lovell's version will be analyzed in the article.

3.1. Translator's Familiarity with Characterization in the Source Text

As a pinnacle of Chinese classical literature, *Journey to the West* narrates the legendary pilgrimage of Xuanzang (Tripitaka), a Tang Dynasty monk, and his three disciples—Monkey (Sun Wukong), Pigsy (Zhu Wuneng), and Sandy (Sha Wujing)—as they seek Buddhist scriptures. The characters in the novel are richly layered, and the portrayal of these figures constitutes a significant

part of its literary value and artistic appeal: far from being mere companions on the journey, they serve as carriers of distinct personality traits and symbolic meanings (e.g., Sun Wukong's unyielding rebelliousness, Zhu Wuneng's indulgence in gluttony, and Sha Wujing's unwavering steadfastness). This fusion of character and cultural symbolism poses a major challenge for translators, who must accurately convey both the figures' core identities and their connotative depth in the target language.

In literary translation, translators tend to adopt the strategy of "equivalent translation," which requires identifying expressions in the target language that align closely with the source text in both cultural resonance and semantic accuracy. This process demands not only in-depth knowledge of the original text's cultural background and literary nuances but also linguistic competence and creative adaptability. In Lovell's version, a more targeted and systematic approach is applied to translating character and place names: literal translation with annotations upon initial appearance, followed by strategic simplification. This approach is evident in the handling of the three disciples' names (all proper nouns below refer to Chinese pinyin for the original characters):

For Sun Wukong: The character is first rendered as "Sun Wukong, 'Sun Who Has Awakened to Emptiness'." Retaining the original pinyin preserves a critical cultural marker of the source text, anchoring the character to his Chinese origins; meanwhile, the parenthetical English annotation ("awakening to emptiness") deciphers the Buddhist implication of "Wukong"—a term rooted in the concept of *śūnyatā* (emptiness), a foundational idea in the novel's religious framework. In subsequent chapters, the name is simplified to "Monkey": this choice eliminates redundant annotations that might disrupt narrative flow, ensuring reading fluency without sacrificing the character's core recognizability. For Zhu Wuneng: Following the same structural logic, Lovell introduces the character as "Wuneng, 'Awakening to Power'—Piggy for short." Here, the pinyin "Wuneng" retains the original name's integrity, while the annotation unpacks the "awakening" motif (a unifying thread across the disciples' names, tied to their Buddhist redemption arcs). The nickname "Piggy" further distills Zhu Wuneng's salient trait into a term that English readers can quickly associate with his gluttonous and earthbound personality. And Wujing ("awakening to purity—Piggy for short"), reflects Sha Wujing's role as a restrained disciple, while "Sandy" serves as a concise, memorable nickname that avoids the linguistic heaviness of repeated pinyin.

This "pinyin + English meaning annotation + simplified nickname" structure achieves a delicate balance between two priorities: preserving the source text's cultural uniqueness (via pinyin and thematic annotations) and adapting to the reading habits of English audiences (via concise nicknames). By retaining the "awakening" motif in annotations, Lovell ensures that the disciples' shared Buddhist redemption arcs are not lost in translation. At the same time, the simplified nicknames ("Monkey," "Piggy," "Sandy") align with English readers' preference for brevity and familiarity in character monikers, preventing the text from feeling overly academic or inaccessible. In doing so, Lovell enables English readers to grasp the disciples' core traits (e.g., Sun Wukong's rebellious spirit, Zhu Wuneng's indulgent nature) while engaging with the narrative in a way that approximates the immersive experience of Chinese readers of the original novel.

3.2. Translator's Accumulation of Traditional Chinese Culture Reflected in the Source Text

In translating *Journey to the West*, Lovell demonstrates her profound accumulation of traditional Chinese culture and her cultural sensitivity. She does not simply pursue linguistic equivalence but seeks to reproduce the philosophical, social, and literary depth of the source text. By employing various strategies, she balances fidelity to cultural meanings with accessibility for Western readers. Three aspects are illustrative.

First, in rendering religious and philosophical concepts, Lovell adopts narrative reconstruction. For instance, the "Six Thieves", a key conceptual cluster presented in Chapter 14 of the source text, refer to the six elements literally rendered as "eye-sees-joy", "ear-hears-anger", "nose-smells-love", "tongue-tastes-desire", "mind-perceives-lust", and "body-suffers". In the framework of Buddhist thought, these elements embody the desires inherently associated with the "Six Roots" (i.e., eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind)—a core notion that underpins the

philosophical context of the source text. Lovell puts forward a creative translational rendition of these concepts, rendering them as “*Eyes-That-See-and-Delight*”, “*Ears-That-Hear-and-Rage*”, “*Nose-That-Smells-and-Loves*”, “*Tongue-That-Tastes-and-Desires*”, “*Mind-That-Sees-and-Lusts*”, and “*Body-That-Sustains-and-Suffers*”. This translational framework, characterized by an “action + emotion” structure, not only retains the Buddhist allegorical connotation inherent in the concept but also renders the symbolic meaning of this term accessible and interpretable within the narrative context of the target text.

Second, in translating poetic and proverbial expressions, Lovell prioritizes semantic equivalence over formal equivalence. Taking the line “*With virtue, one becomes a Buddha or Immortal; with evil, one grows fur and horns*” (Chapter 7 in the source text) as a case, it underscores the polarity of moral cultivation and degeneration through culturally specific imagery. Lovell renders it as “*With discipline, he might become a force for supernatural good; without it, he was pure animal—a wrecking ball in Heaven*”. Here, becoming a Buddha or Immortal, rooted in Buddhist and Daoist connotations, is generalized to a force for supernatural good to make transcendence accessible to Western readers. Meanwhile, growing fur and horns, a symbol of beastly degradation in Chinese culture, is reimagined as “a wrecking ball in Heaven” to highlight the destructive power of indulgence. Though this sacrifices the original’s rhyme and parallel structure, it strengthens the narrative force by clarifying the core moral message.

Lovell’s translation of religious philosophy, social titles, and poetic expressions reflects her deep grounding in traditional Chinese culture and her commitment to effective cultural transmission. She avoids excessive academic jargon and resists reducing *Journey to the West* to “Eastern fantasy,” instead striking a balance between fidelity and readability.

3.3. Translator’s Recreation Strategy for Readers in the Translation Process

When people enjoy the English version of *Journey to the West*, the strategy of aesthetic recreation becomes an indispensable topic. The aesthetic recreation strategy focuses on preserving or recreating the original work’s artistic charm and aesthetic value while ensuring target-language readers can comprehend and appreciate it. It transcends mere translation techniques, becoming a complex issue involving cross-cultural communication and reception. Lovell employs the “dynamic functional compensation” strategy in her translation to recreate the work’s artistic appeal. Instead of mechanically transplanting formal equivalents, she captures the core aesthetic qualities and creatively transforms them via English literary means. This can be illustrated through three representative examples.

First, in satirical effect, Lovell amplifies irony through rhetorical exaggeration. The original sentence “*it was obviously a monster, but he failed to recognize it*” (Chapter 27 in the source text) satirizes Pigsy’s lust-driven foolishness. Lovell renders this as “*It was clearer than the day itself that she was a fiend, but Pigsy’s mortal desires blinded him to the obvious*”. The expression “*clearer than the day itself*” is an intensified variation of the idiom *as clear as day*, which both ridicules Pigsy’s blindness and recreates the biting irony of the source text.

Second, in humorous colloquialization, she reproduces Monkey’s witty irreverence through conversational English. The line “*Sir, let’s not talk of fighting; just give me some spring water*” becomes “*Are you sure you don’t want to just give me some of that water?*” asked Monkey, blocking the blow (Chapter 53 in the source text). Here, the playful “*Are you sure you don’t want to just...*” adds a light, everyday tone that humorously undercuts the seriousness of combat, highlighting Monkey’s defiant wit and the comic incongruity of the scene.

Third, in popularized expression, Lovell adapts culture-specific metaphors into idiomatic English that resonates with modern readers. The line “*Brother, I am not speaking nonsense, but if there is some mistake for a moment, it is not just a monk failing to perform a ritual, but a wife failing to be married, both being delayed*” (Chapter 19 in the source text) is translated as “*Always wise to have a plan B,*” justified Pigsy. By replacing the source’s culturally embedded analogy with the colloquial idiom “plan B,” Lovell ensures immediate comprehensibility for Anglophone readers, while still conveying Pigsy’s cautious pragmatism in a humorous tone.

Lovell's aesthetic recreation operates through strategies of exaggeration, colloquialization, and popularization. By creatively adapting satire, humor, and everyday idioms, she preserves the novel's comic spirit while ensuring accessibility, achieving a dynamic equivalence that allows English readers to enjoy the same aesthetic resonance as the Chinese audience.

4. Conclusion

As one of the four great classical novels of ancient China, *Journey to the West* is not only a literary masterpiece but also a concentrated embodiment of traditional Chinese culture. Reading the novel enables one to appreciate its profound cultural implications and spiritual values. Lovell's translation illustrates the challenges faced by translators in navigating cross-cultural contexts. Her translation strategy balances the transmission of cultural essence with accessibility for readers, while honoring the original's subjectivity and adapting to the target linguistic framework, which offers a significant model for rendering classics in a globalized age. Her version showcases the complex negotiations inherent in translation across cultures, providing an exemplary reference for the translation of canonical works in today's interconnected world.

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