

The Translator as Culture Identity Constructor: A Comparative Study of Yang Hsien-yi and Julia Lovell's English Translations of *The True Story of Ah Q*

Yiwen Li and Long Yang*

School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, China

Email: 2239127025@qq.com (Y.W.L.); l.yang@nwpu.edu.cn (L.Y)

*Corresponding author

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Abstract—This paper compares Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang's 1953 translation and Julia Lovell's 2009 translation of *The True Story of Ah Q* to examine how translators construct Chinese cultural identity in cross-cultural communication. Drawing on the cultural perspective in translation studies and narrative construction theory, this study examines how translators' identities and historical contexts inform their strategic choices. Findings show that Yang's version employs cultural amplification and foreignization, emphasizing the depth and scholarly value of Chinese culture, in line with the nation's early cultural diplomacy. Lovell's version favors reduction and domestication, prioritizing readability and literary appeal within a globalized market. The study demonstrates that translation is not merely linguistic transfer but a vital practice of cultural identity reconstruction.

Keywords—cultural identity construction, narrative construction, *The True Story of Ah Q*

I. INTRODUCTION

Lu Xun is a foundational figure in modern Chinese literature. His representative work *The True Story of Ah Q* employs the archetypal "spiritual victory method" to critique the "national character" of feudal Chinese society, giving the text profound literary and cultural influence. Through multiple English translations, the work has reached a global audience, serving as a key medium for international readers to understand Chinese society and culture. Translation here functions not only as linguistic transfer but also as a vital channel for reconstructing Chinese cultural identity.

Since the "cultural turn" [1] in translation studies, scholars have shifted attention from the sanctity of the source text to the translator's subjectivity and the reception of the translation in the target culture. Venuti [2], in *The Translator's Invisibility*, highlights resistant translation strategies that foreground the translator's role. As cultural mediators, translators' identities, contexts, and strategies directly shape how Chinese culture is perceived abroad.

Although English translations of *The True Story of Ah Q* have been widely studied [3], most research emphasizes linguistic or textual comparison, with some but not systematic focus on how translators construct Chinese cultural identity. This study addresses that gap by examining the translations of Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang and Julia Lovell. The Yangs' version, widely influential in both academic and popular circles, contrasts with Lovell's more recent rendering, which reflects a different cultural and temporal perspective. Together, these two translations span over half a century and illustrate how Chinese and British translators interpret Lu Xun's work from distinct cultural

standpoints.

The study moves beyond a purely linguistic framework, integrating the cultural approach in translation studies with Baker's [4] narrative theory. While the cultural perspective emphasizes how domestication and foreignization strategies affect cultural representation, narrative theory views translation as narrative reconstruction, highlighting the translator's agency in identity formation. Combining these perspectives, the study explores two central questions: how Yangs and Lovell differ in constructing Chinese cultural identity, and how these differences relate to their identities and socio-historical contexts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of translation studies has expanded from linguistic aspects to cultural and identity-related dimensions. Baker's narrative theory of translation posits that translation is not merely cross-linguistic information transfer, but rather a process of narrative reconstruction within cross-cultural contexts [4]. This perspective, which views translation as a form of "reader response" [5], provides a theoretical basis for analyzing how translators reconstruct their cultural perspectives in the target language.

Through narrative strategies, translators participate in reshaping cultural identity—a process that profoundly influences target-language readers' understanding and perception of the source culture. As narrative studies have noted, translation can essentially be regarded as a form of "reader response" [5]. As a typical bilingual expert reader, the translator not only represents a specific reading group but also reconstructs their personal understanding and cultural perspective in the target language. Therefore, the translated text is not only a product of linguistic transfer but also a reproduction of the translator's reading experience and cultural identity. This perspective provides theoretical support for this study's exploration of how the Yangs and Julia Lovell constructed Chinese cultural images through their translation strategies.

At the same time, Venuti's theory [6] about foreignization and domestication emphasizes that translators' strategic choices are not purely linguistic matters; rather, they are closely tied to cultural identity and power dynamics. Chinese scholars such as Luo [7] and Hu [8] have also pointed out that translation serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a vital pathway for cultural exchange and identity construction. Thus, it is evident that

translation is far from a neutral activity—it is an active process in which translators engage in the reconfiguration of cultural identity.

The role of the translator has gained increasing attention in translation studies. Chesterman and Arrojo [9] emphasize “translator subjectivity”, highlighting the active role translators play in the construction of meaning and the transmission of culture. Pym [10], from an ethical perspective, further argues that translators are not only cultural mediators but also bearers of identity and values, whose translational practice must be grounded in responsibility and trust. At the same time, translation is inevitably shaped by social contexts and external forces.

As a representative work of Lu Xun, the English translation of *The True Story of Ah Q* has long been a focus of academic attention. Existing research has primarily concentrated on the following aspects: firstly, comparative studies of the linguistic styles of different translations, such as analyses of the culture-specific terms [11]; studies on Yangs’ translation have examined it through various theoretical lenses, including its representation of Chinese cultural expressions [12] and its comparisons with other versions—though most comparisons involve translations by Jizhen Wang or Lyell rather than Julia Lovell’s version as exemplified in the 2024 corpus-based study by Huang and Feng [13]. Moreover, relatively less attention has been paid to Lovell’s translation in its own right, which provides an entry point for this study. Nevertheless, current research still has certain limitations: the majority of studies remain focused on the linguistic aspects of the text, with limited work systematically exploring the interactive relationship between “translator identity—historical context—translation strategies”. At the same time, there is also a comparative lack of research examining different translations from the perspective of cultural identity construction.

Drawing on Baker’s narrative theory [4], this study examines how the Yangs and Julia Lovell construct distinct images of Chinese culture through their textual practices. The analysis will focus on two key dimensions: the selective appropriation of textual material and framing through labelling. The former concerns the translator’s decisions regarding which cultural information to retain, emphasize, or omit, thereby shaping the narrative’s content and focus. The latter pertains to the treatment of culture-specific items—how source culture concepts are “tagged” or framed so as to guide target readers toward specific perceptions and emotional responses. Through a detailed analysis of these two strategies, we can clearly decode the underlying logic of cultural identity construction embedded in the choices of each translator.

III. CULTURAL IDENTITY IN YANG HSIEN-YI’S AND JULIA LOVELL’S TRANSLATIONS

“The translator always leaves a ‘fingerprint’ on the translated work, and these specific fingerprints constitute the style of the translation and the translator.” [14] The differences in style “are attributable to the translator rather than the source language or the original author.” This insight profoundly reveals that the translator is by no means a transparent intermediary; rather, their own stance, style, and strategies actively participate in the construction of the

target-language narrative. This paper analyzes how Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, in contrast to Julia Lovell, employed different strategies in their English translations of *The True Story of Ah Q*, thereby leaving their own distinctive “fingerprints”. This analysis is grounded in an in-depth comparative reading of the two translated texts, from which examples were selected for their thematic relevance to cultural identity construction, strategic salience in illustrating the translators’ divergent approaches, and textual representativeness across the entire source text.

A. Selective Appropriation: Controlling Narrative Focus and Identity Representation

Example 1:

ST: 夫‘不孝有三无后为大’, ‘若敖之鬼馁而’ [15]. Yangs’ Version: There are three forms of unfilial conduct, of which the worst is to have no descendants, and it is one of the tragedies of life that “spirits without descendants go hungry” (A quotation from Mencius” and “a quotation from the old classic Tso Chuan”) [16].

Lovell’s Version: There are three ways of betraying your parents, of which dying without descendants is the most serious; those without descendants will become hungry ghosts [17].

Yang Hsien-yi and his wife adopted a literal translation supplemented with annotations, explicitly indicating the sources of the allusions (such as Mencius and Tso Chuan), thereby highlighting their classical origins and constructing a profound sense of historical depth in Chinese culture. Julia Lovell, by contrast, simplified the treatment by omitting the source references, which makes the expression smoother but weakens the transmission of the cultural background.

Example 2:

ST: 在钱家的粉墙上映出一个蓝色的虹形 [15]. Yangs’ Version: casting on the Qian family’s white wall a blue, rainbow-shaped shadow (from the Indian ink carried on his head as a sign of repentance) [16].

Lovell’s Version: backs curved into a blue arch against the whitewashed front wall of the Qian household [17].

In Yangs’ translation, the parenthetical clarification of “Indian ink” as a symbol of repentance foregrounds its cultural connotation and reinforces the symbolic dimension of folk punishment. Lovell’s version, however, omits this explanatory note and preserves only the visual image, thereby achieving greater narrative conciseness but at the cost of attenuating the underlying cultural significance.

Example 3:

ST: 原文: ‘好了, 好了!’ 看的人们说, 大约是解劝的。‘好, 好!’ 看的人们说, 不知道是解劝, 是颂扬, 还是煽动 [15].

Yangs’ Version: ‘All right! All right!’ exclaimed some of the onlookers, probably trying to make peace. “Good, good!” exclaimed others, but whether to make peace, applaud the fighters or incite them on to further efforts, is not certain [16].

Lovell’s Version: All right! All right!’ their audience interjected: perhaps to arbitrate; perhaps to express approval; or perhaps to stir things up [17].

Yangs’ translation preserves the repetition and indeterminacy of the original text, conveying the complex psychology of the onlookers. Lovell’s translation, by contrast,

merges the repeated elements and simplifies the sentence structure, rendering the dialogue more concise and aligning its rhythm with English reading conventions.

As a cultural mediator, Lovell seeks to construct a cultural identity for Chinese literature that is less burdensome, demystified, and readily accessible. Her fundamental aim is to facilitate the entry of Lu Xun's works into the global mainstream literary market and resonate with a broader readership. This also reflects the dual dynamics of commercial consideration and cultural exchange inherent in the process of bringing Chinese literature to a global audience in an era of globalization. Thus, "selective adoption" functions as a micro-level battleground for cultural identity construction. Through amplifications, the Yangs deliberately constructs a profound, authentic, and scholarly Chinese cultural identity; whereas through reductions, Julia Lovell deliberately fashions a fluid, modern, and literary Chinese cultural identity. Their choices are inevitable outcomes of their respective cultural standpoints and the distinct historical contexts they inhabit, ultimately shaping two starkly different yet equally coherent images of China in the English-speaking world.

B. Labeling Construction: Translating Culture-Loaded Words

Culture-loaded terms serve as the most salient symbols and labels of cultural identity, and the strategies employed in their translation directly reflect the translator's stance and intention as a cultural identity constructor. How translators handle these terms involves not only the transmission of meaning but also the shaping of the source culture's image and the guiding of target readers' cultural perception. Through distinct translational approaches, Yang Hsien-yi and Julia Lovell have constructed two markedly different Chinese cultural identities in the English-speaking world.

Example 4:

ST: 著之竹帛 [15]

Yangs' Version: preserved on bamboo tablets and silk (note: a phrase used before paper was invented when bamboo and silks served as writing material in China) [16].

Lovell's Version: ...or indeed anything at all [17].

Yangs' translation adopts a foreignizing strategy, using literal translation with annotation to fully preserve the cultural image of "bamboo and silk" as ancient Chinese writing materials, aiming to present China's long-standing civilization to English readers. Lovell's translation, by contrast, employs a domesticating strategy by omitting this culture-loaded term and rendering it simply as a description of the plot, which ensures narrative fluency but entirely erases its historical and cultural imprint.

Example 5:

ST: 神仙 [15]

Yangs' Version: legendary figure [16]

Lovell's Version: god [17]

Yangs' translation renders the term as "legendary figure," a relatively neutral expression that conveys the transcendent quality of Shenxian while avoiding a direct equivalence with "God" in western monotheistic traditions, thereby preserving the distinctiveness of Chinese folk beliefs. Lovell, by contrast, translates it directly as "god," a cultural substitution strategy that draws on the familiar concept of the deity for western

readers, greatly lowering the threshold of comprehension but inevitably reframing Chinese folk beliefs within the framework of western religious culture and reshaping their image.

Example 6:

ST: 秀才 [15]

Yangs' Version: the successful candidate [16]

Lovell's Version: the local genius [17]

Yangs' translation uses "the successful candidate," a semantically accurate rendering that emphasizes the core identity of Xiucan as one who has attained scholarly status within the imperial examination system, thereby preserving the institutional gravity of this cultural concept. Lovell, by contrast, translates it as "the local genius," a more literary expression that highlights the character's intelligence in a way accessible to modern English readers, but one that downplays the underlying cultural connotation of the Chinese imperial examination system.

In summary, in the translation of culture-loaded terms, Yang Hsien-yi and his wife employ a foreignizing strategy with detailed annotations to construct a Chinese cultural identity that is profound, authentic, and historically serious. By contrast, Julia Lovell tends to adopt a domesticating strategy, simplifying, substituting, or omitting cultural imagery to create a Chinese image that is smooth, accessible, and of broader literary appeal. The fundamental difference between their strategies stems from their distinct cultural positions, target audiences, and historical contexts, reflecting, respectively, the imperatives of national cultural dissemination and the dynamics of the global literary market.

C. Macro-Level Motivations: Differences in Strategy and Identity Positioning

Temporal and spatial framing is not merely a technical operation of situating a text within a new historical and cultural context; it is also a profound reflection of the translator's self-positioning and narrative choices as a cultural identity constructor. The distinct historical backgrounds, social environments, and personal identities of Yang Hsien-yi and Julia Lovell determined the essential differences in the Chinese cultural images they constructed through translation.

Yangs' translation activities took place in the early years of the People's Republic of China, when the foreign languages press functioned as an important state institution for external publicity, carrying clear political and cultural diplomatic missions. Commissioned by the government, Yang and Gladys Yang's translation was essentially part of a national cultural export project. This specific temporal and spatial positioning shaped the core narrative goal of Yangs' translation: to present to the world a new, revolutionary China with a long-standing cultural tradition. Yet, as Professor Zhang noted [18], the Foreign Languages Press "actually found it difficult to enter the mainstream English literary market, where most readers were still Chinese, so its actual effect was more about enhancing China's self-image". Thus, Yangs' translation was mainly targeted at scholars and researchers of contemporary Chinese literature and translation.

Nearly half a century later, Julia Lovell's translation emerged in a completely different context—Britain at the

height of globalization. Published by the renowned commercial press Penguin and included in the Penguin Classics series, the translation itself bore strong commercial attributes and market orientation. Lovell had a clear conception of her readership: “non-specialists,” that is, ordinary western readers with little knowledge of China’s revolution or history. Her aim was not political propaganda or cultural education, but rather to ensure that “western readers with no prior knowledge of Lu Xun could still engage with these stories from the far east written nearly a century ago.” Consequently, her temporal and spatial framing strategy was the opposite of Yangs’. She deliberately stripped away the text’s heavy political and historical overtones, reconstructing it as a work of world literature.

The temporal and spatial framing strategies of the Yangs and Julia Lovell vividly demonstrate the interplay between translators’ cultural identities and their historical contexts. Within the framework of state ideology, the Yangs reinforced revolutionary narratives and cultural alterity, thereby constructing a political, serious, and revolutionary image of China. In contrast, driven by the global literary market, Lovell diminished political coloring and cultural distance, constructing instead a literary, accessible, and universal image of China. Neither choice is inherently superior; rather, each represents the most reasonable mode of existence for *The True Story of Ah Q* within the translator’s particular historical moment, cultural identity, and translational purpose.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study systematically examines how translators actively participate in the cross-lingual construction of Chinese cultural identity by comparing the English translations of Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang with those of Julia Lovell in their respective renditions of *The True Story of Ah Q*. The findings reveal significant differences in the translators’ strategies, which not only reflect their distinct personal identities and cultural stances, but also deeply embody the profound influence of their respective historical contexts and social missions.

The Yangs’ translation is characterized by a predominance of cultural amplification and foreignization strategies. By preserving culture-specific items, incorporating detailed annotations, and emphasizing classical origins, their approach strives to construct a Chinese cultural image that is profound, serious, and historically dignified. Their translation practice is closely aligned with the national mission of cultural export, aiming to enhance the international discourse power and self-identity of Chinese culture, thereby demonstrating strong cultural self-awareness and national consciousness. The Yangs’ translation constructs a profound, serious, and historically dignified image of Chinese culture through strategies of cultural amplification and foreignization. Their translation practice closely aligns with the cultural policy of New China [19], which aimed to establish an international image and promote the export of red revolutionary literature and classical literature, demonstrating strong cultural self-awareness and national consciousness. In contrast, Lovell’s translation leans more toward textual reduction and domestication strategies. By simplifying redundant information, replacing culture-loaded

terms, and optimizing narrative flow, she seeks to construct an image of China that is fluid, accessible, and endowed with universal literary value. Her translation strategy serves the demands of the global literary market and reader reception, emphasizing readability and literariness, which reflects her role as a cultural mediator prioritizing adaptability and market orientation in cross-cultural communication.

From the theoretical perspectives of cultural translation and narrative construction, this study demonstrates that translation is not merely a technical act of linguistic transfer, but a profound cultural practice and an act of identity politics. Translators play a crucial role in this process, and their choices and strategies directly shape target-language readers’ perceptions and affective attitudes toward Chinese culture. Future research could expand to include comparisons of more translators and texts, or incorporate reader reception studies, so as to more comprehensively capture the dynamic processes and multidimensional impacts of translation in the construction of cultural identity.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Li conducted the research, drafted and revised the manuscript. Yang provided valuable feedback and assisted with proofreading. Both authors approved the final version.

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